

QUALITATIVE TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF HIGH  
ATTRITION RATES OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS WORKING WITH  
STUDENTS WHO HAVE SEVERE DISABILITIES OR EMOTIONAL BEHAVIORAL  
DISORDERS

by

Cara Jo Lord

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

Barbara White, Ph.D., Committee Chair

Ellen Ruth Ziegler, Ed.D., Committee Member

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand why special education teachers who worked with students with severe disabilities or emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) experienced elevated stress levels and burnout, resulting in high attrition and migration rates. The central research question guiding this study was: What were the leading causes of attrition and migration among teachers who taught students with severe disabilities or EBD in separate settings outside the general education population? This study, guided by Maslow's motivation theory, explored attrition factors among 10 special education teachers in the United States who had taught students with severe disabilities or EBD. Using individual interviews, reflective journals, and focus groups recorded on Microsoft Teams, data were transcribed and analyzed. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was applied to individual interviews, thematic analysis to journal responses, and a four-step coding process to focus group interviews. Results highlighted inadequate support, administrative challenges, and financial issues as key contributors to attrition. Teacher stress and burnout stemmed from heavy workloads, paperwork, low pay, and pressure to meet academic standards. The study suggested addressing these issues through improved support, tailored professional development, competitive compensation, and a supportive work environment to enhance teacher retention.

*Keywords:* special education, stress, burnout, attrition

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD)

Response to Intervention (RTI)

Work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WRMD)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

Individualized education program (IEP)

English as a second language (ESL)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

High nationwide attrition rates for special education teachers are currently an area of concern. The U.S. Department of Education reported a shortage of special education teachers in 2017, with stress and burnout as the primary reasons for teachers leaving the profession (Hester et al., 2020). Among public schools, 44 percent currently indicate having teaching vacancies, with special education being the teaching position that reports the highest number of vacancies (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022a). Special education teachers comprise a high-risk group more prone to burnout and stress because they are exposed to many challenging situations (Carter & Kurtts, 2019; Farmer, 2020; Gansle et al., 2022; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). It is reported that special education teachers in the United States have low levels of job satisfaction, low self-efficacy, high levels of stress and burnout, and a noticeably elevated attrition rate (Ma et al., 2021). The purpose of this chapter is to examine the problem of high attrition rates of special education teachers who instruct students with emotional behavioral disorders (EBD) or severe disabilities and review the theoretical, empirical, and practical significance of the study. The central research question addresses the leading causes of attrition and the migration of special education teachers working with students who have severe disabilities or EBD. The sub-questions explore the causes of stress and burnout, how stress and burnout affect teacher attrition and possible remedies for attrition. Developing potential remedies for the problem of special education teacher attrition requires an understanding of why it occurs.

### **Background**

High attrition rates of special education teachers have been ongoing throughout the nation. The shortage of special education teachers persists as the vacant positions exceed the

number of teachers graduating from teacher preparation programs. Additionally, the high attrition rates among special education teachers further exacerbate this demand, as approximately 13% of educators in this field leave annually (Bartz et al., 2023). The phenomenon of the shortage of special education teachers negatively impacts students, schools, and districts. The shortage also fosters instability and costs thousands of dollars when teachers decide to leave school or the profession (Hester et al., 2020; Vagi et al., 2019). This section discusses historical events that have influenced high attrition rates, how the high attrition rates impact students, schools, and districts, and the theoretical frameworks that have appeared in prior studies regarding teacher attrition.

### **Historical Context**

Individuals with disabilities have been targets of discrimination for many years. They are very often isolated and rejected by communities and in education. Over the decades, treating individuals with disabilities has evolved from isolation towards inclusion (E. W. Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996). The settings for serving individuals with special needs have transitioned from primarily home and institutional locations to school-based settings; thus, in the past, special education teachers were only occasionally in high demand. Before *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, students with disabilities did not have laws mandating their right to an education. Until the 1970s, the denial of admission of children with disabilities into public schools was common (E. W. Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996). Decisions that legally mandated educational rights increased the demand for special education teachers because it increased the number of special education students enrolled.

The demand for special education teachers has continued to change for various reasons. For example, Response to Intervention (RTI) allows for early intervention services for struggling

students, decreasing the need for some students to receive special education services, and resulting in a lowered demand for special education teachers (Dewey et al., 2017). The adverse effects of a declining demand for special education teachers, such as lower enrollment in preparation programs for special education teachers, negative impacts on students with disabilities, and unequal distribution of highly qualified special education teachers. An unequal distribution of highly qualified special education teachers can cause strain for those teachers in underserved communities because they may have to fulfill extra job duties and carry large caseloads (Boe, 2006).

High teacher attrition rates are commonly linked to burnout, low salary, stress, and job dissatisfaction (Sass et al., 2011). Compared to other academic professions, special education teachers experience higher stress levels (Soini et al., 2019). Other reasons that are known to cause stress in the teaching profession are related to reforms in the educational system and changes in the teacher work environment (Lavian, 2012). Ryan et al. (2017) stated that as many as 40% to 50% of new teachers leave the profession within the first five years of their teaching careers.

Along with high attrition rates, fewer teacher candidates are entering into preparation programs, causing a shortage of special education teachers who can serve students with disabilities. The U.S. Department of Education reported that over 200,000 fewer teacher candidates entered training programs in 2014 than in 2008 (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). In addition to having fewer teaching candidates, special education and English language learners have the highest attrition rates. Students who have disabilities, especially those with emotional and behavioral disorders, face an increased likelihood of displaying challenging behaviors. These behaviors impose greater demands on teachers, making it more difficult for them to instruct

effectively. They are linked to higher teacher turnover rates of special education teachers who serve this population (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). Many factors can contribute to this phenomenon, such as a teacher's age, local and state policies, teacher candidate preparation, working conditions, pressure from the administration, student discipline, inadequate training, low pay, teacher responsibilities, and professional development. Some of the most significant challenges for special educators working with populations who have severe disabilities or EBD include stress, burnout, working in separate classroom settings, and lack of support (Henderson et al., 2005).

A significant surge of special educators leaving the profession occurred following the implementation of No Child Left Behind in 2001 (Ryan et al., 2017). When No Child Left Behind was implemented, it influenced test-based accountability. New teachers may deal with pressure from test-based accountability and accompanying stressors such as pressure from the administration, student behaviors, and professional development. The stress placed upon new teachers directly correlates to high attrition rates (Ryan et al., 2017). Due to the many different origins of stress and burnout, ongoing research has investigated the persistence of teachers leaving the profession.

### **Social Context**

High attrition rates for special education teachers can be especially problematic for schools and districts due to the possibility of hiring unqualified staff for positions to fulfill requirements for students with disabilities (Reeves et al., 2021). Teacher attrition leads to an unstable and lower-quality teaching workforce, making school management difficult, which can negatively influence student learning and achievement while diminishing student-teacher relationships and preventing collaboration between teachers (Arviv Elyashiv & Navon, 2021).

Resources and funding often go towards recruitment and induction rather than long-term initiatives to improve the school climate (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). School climate is described as a multi-dimensional concept of events and experiences that are comprised in a school day that shape the interactions and reflect the standards, ethics, relations, and academics that revolve around the areas of safety, relationships, teaching, and learning (Capp et al., 2021). Capp et al. (2021) described how a positive school climate is associated with decreased burnout and higher teacher efficacy, while a negative school climate is associated with elevated stress, burnout, and high attrition. Teachers leaving their profession or migrating to other schools causes faculty instability, impedes ongoing team-building efforts, and facilitates an environment of solidarity (Arviv Elyashiv & Navon, 2021). Teacher turnover exacerbates future attrition rates while imposing related fiscal costs on school districts (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020).

Positive administrative support is cited throughout the research as a determining factor for whether teachers remain or leave their posts. Administrative support includes, but is not limited to, additional mentoring, increased learning opportunities, more planning time, teacher input in school-wide decision-making, increased teacher collaboration, meaningful interactions between administration and teachers, and moral, emotional, or instructional support (Ford et al., 2019). A lack of administrative support is a source of teacher burnout that leads to attrition, whereas increased administrative support helps decrease teachers' stress, increase job satisfaction, and result in fewer teachers leaving (Ford et al., 2019; Nguyen, 2021). Teachers, especially novice teachers, need adequate support from the administration to continue effective teaching practices for students with EBD (Cumming et al., 2021). Administrative support involves school principals who approve of appropriate discipline for students while including teachers in the decision-making about disciplinary actions, demonstrating recognition for



teachers' work, and showing appreciation for the teachers. An administration that actively supports staff while being knowledgeable about special education policies is more likely to retain staff. Alongside lack of administrative support, teachers leave the field due to dissatisfaction, poor salary, student discipline problems, poor faculty influence, working conditions, school characteristics, and environment (Aldosiry, 2022; García et al., 2022).

The education system shifted in 2020 and 2021 as the nation worked through the Covid-19 pandemic. In Spring 2020, teachers transitioned to virtual learning with limited preparation or guidance. They experienced sustained high levels of stress and burnout due to the novel instructional approaches demanded from them, the insufficient support received during the ongoing changes, and the heightened workload imposed on teachers (K. C. Herman et al., 2023; Marshall et al., 2022). Challenges stemming from the pandemic that impact teacher stress and overall well-being encompass understaffed schools, heightened workload for remaining staff, diminished institutional and community support, negative political rhetoric surrounding mask mandates, and the constant juggling between planning and delivering lessons across virtual, in-person, or hybrid platforms. These obstacles were particularly amplified for educators working with students with EBD (Lee et al., 2023). Dos Santos (2021) reported that many educators planned to leave the teaching profession after the 2020-2021 school year due to a heightened need for increased government and administrative support for their well-being. Many teachers were forced to return to face-to-face lessons in the middle of the pandemic despite health concerns and other related factors. Teachers acknowledged the following issues as sources of stress during the pandemic: stress and disappointment in their current teaching position, low salary, working in-person with large groups of students within a closed classroom, being around students who are unable to be vaccinated, dangerous working environments, hybrid approaches

to learning, not being knowledgeable about new technology for virtual learning, excessive workload, family health, lack of resources, and little time for recreation (Dos Santos, 2021).

Teacher quality is the strongest school-based predictor of student outcomes (Schwartz et al., 2019). Non-White and minority students and students living in poverty are affected most by high teacher attrition rates and are taught by the least qualified teachers. When an experienced teacher leaves the profession, they are typically replaced by another teacher with less experience, such as a first-year teacher or someone who took an alternative pathway to obtain a teaching license (Guthery & Bailes, 2022). These novice educators are likelier to leave the profession in their first five years. New, inexperienced teachers often accept teaching positions at high-poverty schools. Once these teachers gain experience, they are likely to move to schools with lower poverty rates, leaving high-poverty schools with a constant rotation of new teachers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Consequently, students are negatively impacted by a lack of access to skilled, experienced teachers. In many instances, teachers in high-need fields migrate from schools with high incidents of discipline problems to schools with fewer discipline problems (Harrell et al., 2019; Karlberg & Bezzina, 2022; Torres, 2020).

### **Theoretical Context**

N. K. Martin, Sass, and Schmitt (2012) developed a theoretical framework to understand teacher stress and burnout regarding teachers' intent to leave. Predictors for intent to leave include efficacy in student engagement, instructional management, personal accomplishment, and student behavior stressors. Effectiveness in student engagement and instructional management tends to influence the satisfaction-related areas of personal accomplishment and student behavior. N. K. Martin, Sass, and Schmitt explained that a sense of burnout can grow over time when there is an increased effort in classroom management to control negative student

behaviors. Additionally, when teachers experience low levels of personal accomplishment, job dissatisfaction can emerge, leading to an intent to leave a teaching position. Maslow's theory of motivation can be applied to understand teachers leaving due to a lack of efficacy and student engagement. Teachers with unmet needs from Maslow's hierarchy of needs will likely become complacent instructors instead of actively engaging students (Boogren, 2018). Decreased engagement leads to lower student achievement. Lower student engagement and diminished achievement lessen a teacher's sense of belonging, and teachers of students requiring high levels of support often provide instruction with low expectations of the student's potential for learning (Hollingshead et al., 2018).

Maslow's hierarchy of needs can assist in mapping out which teachers' needs are unmet. Five stages of needs dictate human behavior: physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Brunsting et al. (2022) outlined burnout as a dynamic construct from the works completed by Schaufeli et al. (2017). Burnout is an individual's state of mind in response to the exhaustion of all their coping resources, often caused by chronic stress. The three dimensions of burnout are emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion is feeling completely depleted of energy, making one incapable of meeting the demands of their job or task (Brunsting et al., 2022). Depersonalization occurs when an individual has become emotionally detached and extremely cynical in their work environment (Garwood et al., 2018). A lack of personal accomplishment negatively impacts competence at work and increases perceptions of ineffectiveness (Bettini et al., 2022). These dimensions of burnout helped shape the framework for this study. A thriving teacher is likelier to remain in the profession beyond their first five years. Successful teachers have their basic and psychological needs met so that they can reach a point of self-actualization (Boogren, 2018).

## **Problem Statement**

The problem is that the high attrition rate of special education teachers leaving the profession continues to increase, as does the percentage of special education students, which can result in underserved students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022b). The main objective of this study was to investigate the underlying reasons behind the heightened levels of stress and burnout experienced by special education teachers who work with students with severe disabilities or emotional or EBD and to shed light on the factors contributing to high attrition and migration rates within this group of teachers. Studies have shown that 50% of special education teachers leave the field within the first five years of teaching (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Cumming et al., 2021). While most research links stress and burnout to teachers leaving the profession, there are many causes of the stress experienced by special education teachers. Exploring the phenomenon of burnout among special education teachers will give insight into the lived experiences of these individuals while identifying the problem's origin and helping to remedy the causes to improve attrition rates.

The problem of teachers leaving the profession is financially detrimental, hinders team-building efforts, and negatively impacts student learning (Guthery & Bailes, 2022). Studies indicate that the origins of stress and burnout may result from test-based accountability and the efficacy of student engagement (Embse et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2017). Special education teachers who work with students who have severe disabilities or EBD experience a unique set of challenges (Cumming et al., 2021). The challenges may include isolation from the general education population, extreme student behaviors, additional paperwork, lack of administrative support, lack of planning time, and lack of collegial support (O'Brien et al., 2019). Qualified instructors are needed to teach students with the most challenging needs. Unfortunately, when

districts have a shortage of highly qualified special education teachers, they hire unqualified professionals to instruct students with disabilities (Hester et al., 2020). Hiring less-than-qualified teachers can have legal ramifications and negatively impact student learning and development.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand why special education teachers who worked with students with severe disabilities or EBD experienced elevated stress levels and burnout, resulting in high attrition and migration rates. At this stage in the research, attrition will be defined as teachers leaving a teaching position for one of two reasons: leaving the profession or leaving their current position for another school, subject area, or district. A teacher of students with severe disabilities or EBD educates students with severe intellectual disabilities or EBD as their primary or secondary exceptionality on their individualized education plans. Teacher attrition and migration negatively impact students, colleagues, schools, and districts (García et al., 2022). Special education teachers who work with this specific demographic have unique challenges. Students with severe disabilities or EBD need highly qualified educators trained to meet the legal requirements of student's individualized education plans (Harper et al., 2022; Hester et al., 2020). Understanding what causes these educators to leave the profession or migrate to different schools and content areas could contribute to solving the problem of special education teacher attrition and decreasing the shortage of special education teachers. Examining the participants' lived experiences will also reveal their similarities and differences according to their needs regarding Maslow's theory of motivation.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study was directed toward special education teachers who work with students with severe disabilities or EBD. The population of students who have severe disabilities and EBD includes students with complex medical needs, physical needs, severe and profound intellectual disabilities, emotional behavioral disorders, and autism. Teachers of students within this demographic face unique challenges that differ from challenges faced by teachers educating students in inclusive settings. While the population of adaptive special education teachers is exceedingly small, it is worth examining why they leave the profession and migrate to a different setting.

### **Theoretical Significance**

Several studies have examined the issue of high attrition rates among teachers. However, it is worth noting that many of these studies tend to generalize and consider all educators as a collective. For example, Ryan et al. (2017) focused on test-based accountability for teachers and how it influences the high turnover rate. In another study, N. K. Martin, Sass, and Schmitt (2012) examined the connection between efficacy in student engagement and instructional management and the likelihood of teachers intending to leave their teaching positions. The study considers elementary, secondary, and high school teachers, acknowledging that each group faces unique stressors that can influence attrition rates. The researchers utilize a theoretical framework to analyze these factors and their impact on teacher retention. Billingsley and Bettini (2019) completed a literature review investigating special educators' attrition and retention based on preparation and qualifications, school characteristics, working conditions, and demographic and nonwork factors. Each of these studies adds valuable information surrounding the high attrition rates of teachers in the United States. Conducting a study specifically targeting teachers who work with students with severe disabilities or emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) could

yield significant insights into the reasons behind their attrition or migration to other teaching positions. Such a study has the potential to provide valuable additional information about the factors influencing this group of teachers' decisions to leave the profession or seek alternative teaching opportunities. Considering the distinctive nature of the role of special education teachers working with students with severe disabilities or EBD, gaining insights into how these individuals perceive challenging classroom situations can enrich our understanding of Maslow's theory of motivation. This study intended to demonstrate how participants' career experiences align with the different levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, offering insights into the relative positioning of their journeys within the hierarchy. There is a possibility that the participants will have similar experiences and are at the same level of motivation or have differing experiences and rankings on the hierarchy of needs. By examining the factors contributing to attrition, this study aimed to provide valuable insights into whether these factors are universal among all special education teachers who work with students with severe disabilities or EBD.

### **Empirical Significance**

While other studies have focused on specific themes, this proposed study focused on a particular group of teachers. Grouping all special education teachers into one group and generalizing their job duties can give an incomplete picture of a phenomenon. Special educators in the general education setting have significantly different job responsibilities from those who work in a separate setting with students who have severe disabilities or EBD. Teachers of students with EBD often experience feelings of isolation, a sense of unpreparedness, being unsupported, and becoming overwhelmed by student needs (Gilmour et al., 2022). There may be shared stressors from teachers who teach in classroom settings separated from the general student population and those who serve students in classrooms within the general school

population. However, special educators who teach students with severe disabilities or EBD deal with more extreme situations that require a different set of skills. To capture a comprehensive understanding, this study focused on participants who are currently working or have previous experience in separated classroom settings, as students with severe disabilities or EBD are typically educated in such environments for different durations during the school day.

### **Practical Significance**

The study of special education teachers working with a specific population of students with severe disabilities or EBD can provide information about potential causes for high attrition rates. Previous studies have shown that special education teachers experience higher levels of burnout than general education teachers (Carter & Kurtts, 2019; Farmer, 2020; Gansle et al., 2022; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; E. Kiel et al., 2016). While each special educator who teaches in a separate setting may have different experiences based on the disabilities within their caseload, they share a commonality of teaching apart from the general education setting. Having information about potential causes for the high turnover rate of teachers in separate settings could contribute to teacher retention and lower attrition rates. Braun et al. (2020) suggested that teacher candidates in preparation programs should be taught how to successfully cope with stress and work-related burdens that may arise early in their careers. Identifying the stressors and burdens is imperative so those working with teaching candidates can provide better preparation and support for teachers working with significant and vulnerable populations in special education services.

### **Research Questions**

The problem is that the high attrition rate of special education teachers leaving the profession continues to increase (Hester et al., 2020). While there are many different causes for



teachers leaving the profession, the focus of this study was on teachers who specifically work with students with severe disabilities or EBD. These educators face unique challenges that may contribute to high attrition rates. To investigate the issue of high attrition rates, the study aimed to address a Central Research Question and three Sub-Questions (SQs) that collectively comprehensively explore the topic.

### **Central Research Question**

What are the leading causes of attrition and migration among teachers who teach students with severe disabilities or EBD in separate settings outside of the general education population?

### **Sub-Question One**

What are the primary causes of stress and burnout for special education teachers who teach students with severe disabilities or EBD in separate settings?

### **Sub-Question Two**

What factors about teaching students with severe disabilities or EBD in separate settings play a role in why teachers remain in or leave their positions?

### **Sub-Question Three**

What interventions, strategies, and teacher support can help remedy high attrition rates for special education teachers working with students with severe disabilities or EBD?

### **Definitions**

1. *Attrition* – a person leaving the educational field or profession (Henderson et al., 2005).
2. *Burnout* – an extreme form of stress characterized by emotional fatigue, detachment, irritability, and indifference related to the work environment (Ryan et al., 2017). Burnout develops gradually from emotional exhaustion, followed by pessimism as an ineffective

coping strategy, and eventually accumulates in feelings of inadequacy (Smetackova et al., 2019).

3. *Migration* – leaving one school for another (Ryan et al., 2017).
4. *School climate* – a multifaceted and intricate concept that encompasses the overall quality and nature of the school environment (Đurišić et al., 2023).
5. *Teacher longevity* – the quantity of time a teacher remains in the profession (Ryan et al., 2017).

### **Summary**

High attrition rates of special education teachers are a growing nationwide problem. Teachers leaving the profession has been a problem for many years and continues to increase in prominence and impact. Up to fifty percent of special education teachers leave the field within the first five years of their careers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Hagaman and Casey (2018) referred to the chronic shortage of special education teachers as a revolving door due to teachers entering the field and leaving after only a few years. As much as 40% of teachers experience burnout, and special education teachers are especially vulnerable to burnout and higher attrition rates (Park & Shin, 2020). While some teachers leave the profession entirely, other special educators migrate to different schools and districts, while some transfer into general education positions. In each instance, the departure of special educators negatively impacts students, colleagues, schools, and districts (Ma et al., 2021). There is a shortage of qualified special education teachers and a growing number of students needing special education services (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). A diminished supply of special education professionals and an increasing population of students with disabilities result in underserving that student population along with the possibility of services provided by underqualified teachers. This proposed study

focused on special education teachers working with students with severe disabilities or EBD. The study's objective was to comprehend the reasons behind the heightened levels of stress and burnout among special education teachers who work with special education students. The aim is to explore how these factors contribute to the high rates of attrition and migration within this demographic. This study aimed to find specific causes that result in the high turnover rate for special education teachers and identify potential ways to remedy and mitigate the problem. This study focused on reasons for attrition, specific challenges of special education teachers who teach in separate settings, how the high attrition rate affects students, schools, and districts, and ways to alleviate these problems.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

The theoretical framework for the proposed study was examined in chapter two and includes an in-depth review of the relevant literature. The theory of motivation forms the theoretical framework for the study. The literature review analyzes the qualities and skills of a special education teacher, attrition rates in the educational field, stress and burnout of special education teachers, teacher preparation and qualifications, and coping strategies for teachers. Many other studies have explored the nature of teacher burnout and high attrition rates. However, there is minimal literature targeting special education teachers in adaptive settings working with students who have severe disabilities or emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Becoming a teacher is typically intrinsically motivated and heavily based on emotions and passions, but those reasons often change over time. Kaçaniku et al. (2022) found that the motivations and intentions with which teachers begin their careers are not time-stable and will likely shift throughout the years. Teachers' feelings and emotions are often related to stress and burnout, which are the primary reasons that cause teachers to leave the profession (Hester et al., 2020). Many factors within the work environment influence teachers' emotions, such as relationships between teachers, teachers and students, teachers and parents, and teachers and administrators (Puertas et al., 2019). Maslow's theory of motivation was used as the main framework in this study to explore why teachers' attitudes and feelings change towards teaching.

### **Theory of Motivation**

The American psychologist Abraham Maslow developed a theory of motivation in 1943 known as the hierarchy of needs. Maslow's theory proposed that humans are fundamentally

motivated by a series of needs that start with meeting the necessities of life, such as food, shelter, and water (M. H. Fisher & Crawford, 2020). The needs are often displayed in a pyramid, beginning with physiological needs and progressing to safety, love, self-esteem, and self-actualization. Physiological needs include essentials such as water, food, and oxygen. The next level of need is safety, which is fundamental and includes security and shelter. Participation in organized groups leads to the subsequent need for love and affection, which includes a sense of belonging. Self-esteem emerges next in the hierarchy of needs and is followed by self-actualization. Self-esteem refers to feelings towards oneself and respect for others and from others, while self-actualization refers to realizing one's full potential and personal growth (Boogren, 2018). Some motivational needs can be met simultaneously, but essential needs will override any other need. For example, a person can fall in love while being hungry and experiencing homelessness, but their focus remains on meeting physiological needs first and less on love. Maslow's theory of motivation assumes that humans are born with specific needs, such as hunger, which cannot be ignored until they are satisfied. Once the lower basic needs are satisfied, an individual can begin reaching self-actualization.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs can be applied to many forms of research, including investigating teacher retention. Job satisfaction is a subjective term with a meaning that varies from person to person. Likewise, the emotion of happiness is also subjective, and happy employees often are more productive, better problem solvers, more willing to help co-workers, and have increased self-efficacy (Stewart et al., 2018). Stewart et al. (2018) examined the workplace through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and included employees' wages to meet physiological needs. Employees use monetary compensation to meet basic needs such as water, shelter, food, and clothing. Safety needs are established through job security, duties, and

workplace structure. Employment and stability provide predictability, order, and a healthy sense of an individual's quality of life. Love and belongingness needs are satisfied through a positive work culture and establishing employee relationships. Developing a sense of belongingness meets the human emotional need for intrapersonal relationships. Esteem needs are achieved through positive relationships between administration and staff. Administration can help the staff feel trusted and capable in their jobs. Self-actualization can be established as employees advance and continuously challenge themselves. Stewart et al. (2018) emphasized that an organization must economically and psychologically compensate its employees. Neither is sufficient on its own. If an organization compensates its employees with high wages but ignores the emotional state of the staff, there is a higher chance of unsatisfied, unhappy employees.

In addition to looking at the workplace through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Schulte (2018) applied this theory to career pathways and how they align with motivational needs regarding education levels. Career pathways connect academics, credentials, and work experience across a learning continuum (Schulte, 2018). Physiological needs such as air, food, and sleep correlate with entry-level work. A person must maintain a basic income level to maintain resources such as water and food. Entry-level work often requires a high school diploma and a knowledge of basic work skills. At the second level of safety, individuals recognize the need for improvement, which correlates to getting a job promotion and may also include getting a better-paying job and gaining more certifications that will benefit career advancement in the future. The third level, love and belonging, correlates with adding extra responsibilities, building respect within a career, and advancing. In a career, the third level may require additional education, such as an undergraduate degree. The third level of the hierarchy also includes a pay increase which could mean more time spent with family, enjoying hobbies, or

extra money put towards retirement. The level of esteem and self-actualization are advanced levels within the hierarchy. At the level of esteem, individuals can find stability in their careers and may be motivated to progress further. Schulte (2018) stated that at this stage, both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations are present. An individual may continue to advance in a career and move to a position in leadership where they are responsible for other employees. The last level of self-actualization emerges when an individual moves beyond purely self-serving motivations within a career. More complete self-actualization could include mentorship, life-long learning, philanthropy, and retirement. In the last level of a career-oriented hierarchy of needs, individuals may pursue interests by seeking advanced education.

While some researchers fully embrace Maslow's hierarchy of needs, others challenge its antiquated concepts. J. M. Kiel (1999) questioned the fourth and fifth levels of hierarchy, esteem, and self-actualization. J. M. Kiel argues that the shape of the hierarchy of needs should be updated. Currently, the hierarchy of needs is displayed as a triangle or pyramid, with esteem and self-actualization at the top within the smallest tiers, which are closed and confined. The closed top of the triangle implies that self-actualization is a process that ends. J. M. Kiel states that self-actualization is a never-ending and continuously evolving process. Therefore, the top of the triangle should be open. The open concept represents a greater sense of potential. Considerable overlap exists among the levels of needs within the hierarchy. Recent models indicate that basic needs, safety needs, and love and belonging needs intersect and constitute lower-order needs. It is essential to fulfill these lower-order needs to a certain extent to fulfill the higher-order self-esteem needs (Crandall et al., 2020).

The hierarchy in Maslow's theory of motivation can be applied to teachers in multiple ways. Boogren (2018) encouraged educators to regularly self-evaluate by going through a series

of guided questions. The questions include assessing whether basic needs are met, identifying one's feelings of safety, evaluating a sense of belongingness, rating feelings of confidence, and determining what it means to live one's best life. Once questions for the bottom of the hierarchy are answered and met, an educator can begin to answer other questions about meeting personal needs. If there is a question that an educator has difficulty answering, then they could have the opportunity to intervene with targeted strategies. By taking a personal inventory and targeting areas that may require additional attention, an educator can pinpoint frustrations and other problems so that they can be addressed, and a more complete self-actualization becomes possible.

### **Related Literature**

The following review of related literature synthesizes research investigating relationships between stress and burnout of special education teachers working with students with severe disabilities or EBD, along with the elevated rate of attrition with that population of teachers. The specific topics in this section include qualities and skills of special education teachers, attrition rates in the educational field, stress and burnout of special education teachers, teacher preparation and qualifications, teacher coping, and potential solutions.

#### **Qualities and Skills of Special Education Teachers**

Special education teachers serve various roles within the education system and individual schools. Most special education teachers teach in inclusive settings within the general population. A small percentage of special education teachers work with students who have severe disabilities or EBD. The roles of special education teachers can look very different compared to the role of general education teachers. Special education teachers play a crucial role in identifying and addressing student challenges and designing, modifying, or adapting



instruction and content for learners with disabilities. At the secondary school level in numerous states, a consultative and collaborative approach is adopted, with special educators supporting students with disabilities. In contrast, general educators serve as the primary subject teachers. This arrangement allows special educators to focus on meeting the unique needs of their students, alleviating the requirement to fulfill subject matter competency criteria. Consequently, the instruction delivered by special education teachers can be characterized as direct, intense, repetitive, and highly engaging (Robinson et al., 2019; Sheppard & Wieman, 2020).

Students with severe disabilities or EBD have needs that are different from their typically developing peers. The needs of students who have severe disabilities or EBD may include medical needs, adaptive needs, the need to learn life skills, the need for behavior intervention plans, plans for potential crises, and the need for assistance with feeding and toileting. In special education, two main approaches surround the educational practices for the adaptive population: the medical model and the social model. The medical model aims to identify a student's disability and establish effective intervention strategies. Meanwhile, the social model differentiates between disability and impairment, highlighting the role of social structures in students' learning and proposing school changes (Roegman et al., 2018). Ruppert et al. (2017) identified four core skills and four core qualities of special education teachers working with students with severe disabilities or EBD. Ruppert et al. (2017) defined skills as actions teachers perform during their job activities. The four core skills include advocacy, systematic instruction and academics, individualization and adaptation, and collegial relationships. Qualities are defined by Ruppert et al. (2017) as characteristics that teachers display while at work. The four core qualities include high expectations, positivity, flexibility, creativity, and continual

improvement. Although the categories of skills and qualities are distinct, their realization is often intertwined.

### ***Core Skills***

Ruppar et al. (2017) gave brief descriptions of each element of the core skills of special education teachers. Advocacy describes a teacher's actions of ensuring that students are safe and healthy, becoming independent, connecting with community members and peers, and being challenged academically. Students with severe disabilities or EBD should not be required to do less; the special education teacher is responsible for holding high expectations for these students. Systematic instruction and academics refer to special education teachers using observations to form a systematic or step-by-step approach to teaching. Access to age-appropriate academic content is essential for both teacher and student success. Instruction for students with severe disabilities or EBD is highly individualized and adapted to individual needs. A special education teacher is responsible for ensuring that the academic material is adapted appropriately to meet the goals set for the students. Consistent and persistent adaptation requires special education teachers to demonstrate their professional creativity regularly. Collegial relationships are defined by Ruppar et al. (2017) as mutual relationships involving communication, respect, support, and a beneficial partnership. The collegial relationships may be with paraprofessionals, parents, teachers, community members, and staff. The relationships are always in support of the needs of the students.

### ***Core Qualities***

Ruppar et al. (2017) found that the core qualities are part of a teacher's characteristics, which help form their professional identity. Maintaining a culture of high expectations is the first core quality. Special education teachers with high expectations for their students believe every

student can learn. High expectations play an integral role in all the core skills. A special education teacher can maintain high expectations by keeping an open mind and finding opportunities for the students to build upon their strengths. Positivity is described as a mindset. Positive thinking and having an optimistic outlook about a student's current and future capabilities are essential for special education teachers of students with significant needs. Classrooms enrolled with students who have severe disabilities or EBD often have a wide range of abilities that are constantly changing. Having the abilities of flexibility and creativity is essential for these teachers. Flexibility and creativity appear in all aspects of the core skills. Continual improvement emerges in a mindset when a teacher recognizes that there is always new information to be obtained and then seeks ways to improve teaching practices.

### **Attrition Rates in the Educational Field**

Attrition within the educational field refers to teachers exiting their positions. Teachers also migrate to other positions by leaving a school or transferring to a new role within the same school. In both cases, when a teacher leaves a current position, a new person is often required to fulfill those teaching duties and serve students in need. In the United States, teacher attrition rates vary. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) found that the highest teacher attrition rates are in the South, especially in urban areas, compared to the Northeast, Midwest, and West. The Northeast has the highest teacher retention rates of all types of districts. Title I schools have an 80% higher attrition rate of experienced teachers when compared to non-Title I schools. Mason-Williams et al. (2020) reported that when a teacher vacates a position, it can cost between \$4,500 for small rural districts and \$17,000 for larger urban districts. Retirement also affects attrition rates; Sutchter et al. (2019) stated that approximately one-third of teachers leave the

profession due to retirement. Therefore, two-thirds of teachers who leave teaching positions do so because they are discontented or want to seek better opportunities.

There is nationwide difficulty with filling special education positions due to an ongoing shortage of special education teachers and low retention rates (Theobald et al., 2021). Billingsley and Bettini (2019) found that 50 % of special education teachers leave the field within their first five years. Hester et al. (2020) recounted that as of June 2017, the U.S. Department of Education reported that 46 states experienced a shortage of special education teachers. The National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services reported an all-time low of special education teacher candidates in teacher preparation programs (Mason-Williams et al., 2020). Each year, between 17% and 29% of special education teachers leave their positions to move to other educational positions or to exit the teaching field altogether. Special education teachers leave the profession while special education students increase, causing significant problems nationwide (Gansle et al., 2022; Peyton et al., 2021). A growing shortage of special education teachers negatively impacts students, schools, and districts by fostering instability and creating financial burdens costing thousands of dollars when a teacher leaves a school or the profession (Castro, 2023; Wyatt & O'Neill, 2021).

Special education teachers often leave positions in districts with underserved students, such as students from low-income families (Beck et al., 2020; Van Eycken et al., 2022). Ma et al. (2021) noted that special education teachers in the United States have the lowest job satisfaction, lowest self-efficacy, highest levels of stress and burnout, and the highest attrition rate. A school's culture heavily influences a teacher's decision to stay or leave (Harris et al., 2019). The reason special education teachers leave the field may be primarily due to stress and burnout, and that population of educators is considered to be a high-risk group that is more prone to stress and

burnout than other groups of teachers because they are exposed to many challenging situations (Aldosiry, 2022; Mrstik et al., 2019). The requirements and demands needed to serve populations with complicated disabilities are major contributing factors for special education teachers who leave teaching positions. Other reasons for the attrition of special education teachers include job dissatisfaction, a lack of support, being overwhelmed by student needs, unmanageable job duties, and feelings of disempowerment (Castro, 2023). Teachers will experience growing dissatisfaction if they cannot obtain what they consider essential in their profession (Madigan & Kim, 2021). While most teachers leave the profession due to job-related issues, external factors can also contribute to attrition, such as better job opportunities, the need for certifications, and family and health concerns. Current research examines special education teachers as a whole group, but there are many subgroups within the field of special education. The group of special educators instructing students with significant needs such as physical disabilities, severe intellectual disabilities, and emotional and behavioral challenges is a group that requires further investigation.

### ***Predictors of Teacher Turnover***

Many factors influence a teacher's decision to leave the profession or move to a different school. Historically, trends have found that these decisions mainly relate to teacher characteristics, subject area, and workplace conditions. Schools with large populations and a population of non-white students greater than 25% have historically had higher turnover rates (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) found that teachers who entered the profession through an alternative pathway were likelier to leave than teachers who completed traditional certification programs. They also found that special education teachers have some of the highest attrition rates regardless of the type or size of

a school. During the investigation of workplace conditions, it was discovered that there was a correlation between compensation and turnover rates (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Wiggan et al., 2021). Teachers whose salaries ranged between \$72,000 and \$78,000 were less likely to leave, while districts with a maximum teacher salary of \$60,000 experienced higher turnover rates.

A lack of administrative support was among the strongest predictors of teacher attrition. Administrative support is an administrator's ability to encourage, acknowledge, communicate clearly, and run a school. A strong administrator is essential for special education teachers and alternative educational settings serving students with severe disabilities or EBD (Bettini et al., 2020). Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) found that a teacher is twice as likely to leave the profession or school when dealing with an unsupportive administrator. Special education teachers are known for various job duties such as academic and nonacademic instruction, instructional support, collaborating with other teachers, behavior management, and progress monitoring. Much less information is known about special education teachers' responsibilities and job duties in working with students with severe disabilities or EBD. Each student may have very different needs, meaning that a special education teacher's job duties change from student to student. All teachers are evaluated annually by their administrative team. Often, an evaluation is done using an instrument designed for general education teachers. In some cases, the administrative team may not fully understand the qualities and skills required of special education teachers of students with severe disabilities or EBD (Ruppar et al., 2017).

### ***Impact on Students***

While special education teachers may experience physical symptoms and negative impacts on their emotional well-being due to burnout and stress, students are also impacted

(Hester et al., 2020). Mason-Williams et al. (2020) explored how the shortage of special education teachers compromised the ability to meet the goal of providing an equal education to students with disabilities. The special education teacher shortage affects high-poverty schools more than any other demographic. Teachers have been known to migrate towards schools that have higher student achievement and students from more affluent backgrounds in comparison to schools that have high populations of students with low socioeconomic status, low achievement scores, and a more significant number of disciplinary problems (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Feng & Sass, 2018). Districts and governments spend large amounts of money by hiring emergency staff to compensate for unmet services for students with disabilities and to address teacher shortages. The issue of underqualified personnel arises when emergency staff are hired to compensate for teacher shortages. A significant portion of students with disabilities are inadequately served due to their service providers lacking full qualifications as teachers (Wilkerson et al., 2022). Special education teachers who complete an alternative program under a provisional waiver leave the field more often than those who undergo a traditional preparation program (Mason-Williams et al., 2020). High-poverty schools depend on emergency staffing and have fewer certified special education teachers.

Special education teachers of color generally have higher retention rates than white special education teachers who work in high-poverty schools. While working conditions account for some teacher attrition, schools with a predominant student population of non-white children have a 46% higher turnover rate of teachers than schools with fewer non-white students (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). High-poverty schools employ and retain more special education teachers of color than white teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Mason-Williams et al., 2020). Mason-Williams et al. (2020) also stated that some teacher

turnover is good because it typically rids the profession of poor teachers. On the contrary, new teachers come with the most up-to-date evidence-based practices from their preparatory program and can maximize student learning (Price & Collett, 2012). Unfortunately, when new teachers quit early, students do not benefit from these practices.

Before teachers leave the profession, a significant stress level may consume a teacher. Over time, stress could build into burnout, and teachers can become emotionally exhausted, depersonalize the students, and feel a lack of accomplishment. Special education teachers who educate students with highly challenging and disruptive behaviors are known to experience the most stress (Koenen et al., 2019; Park & Shin, 2020). Teachers have sometimes been known to detach themselves from their jobs to protect their emotional state. Teachers who disengage so that they are not affected emotionally are less likely to correct disruptive and challenging behaviors. Consequently, disengagement has negative impacts on students and their academic achievement.

### ***Impact on Schools***

A shortage of special education teachers can make it difficult for schools to provide students with disabilities with the services outlined in their individualized educational plans. An issue that arises that impacts schools is the labor-intensive hiring process. When there is a deficiency of special education teachers at the school level due to high turnover rates, the administration is put in the position of hiring individuals to fill those openings. With a shortage of special educator prospects, the administration could hire individuals who may lack proper teacher preparation and credentials (Mason-Williams et al., 2020). Teachers lacking professional preparation and credentials present several issues, such as not fulfilling their required job duties, creating more work for others, inadequately serving students with individualized educational



plans, and needing extra training and professional development. Adding more job duties and work on already strained teachers can lead to increased frustration and stress. Ill-prepared special education teachers serving students with disabilities can have detrimental effects on student outcomes that ultimately end in legal battles. The extra training and professional development for teachers who lack preparation and credentials are essentially wasted resources and take away time from students receiving disabilities services when a teacher decides to leave a position.

An imbalance of labor within a school due to teacher attrition results in weakened school improvement efforts (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). In response to staffing shortages, schools may make several changes to resolve the issue, such as increasing class sizes or hiring inexperienced or underqualified teachers. These changes can result in negative impacts, such as increased negative student behavior and decreased student achievement. Therefore, while schools implement improvement strategies, the issues facing students receiving special education services may remain the same or even grow more problematic.

### **Characteristics of Burnout**

Maslach and Jackson (1981) developed the Maslach Burnout Inventory, a survey designed to measure various characteristics of burnout syndrome. Maslach and Jackson describe three key aspects: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and loss of personal accomplishment. The survey was created with individuals in the helping professions in mind. Working intensely with people who need help can cause chronic stress and emotional depletion, which are precursors to burnout. Once an individual experiences burnout, the quality of care and services can be less than standard. Maslach and Jackson also report that burnout is a factor of attrition in the workplace. Seibt and Kreuzfeld (2021) described burnout as a work-related phenomenon that occurs over time when an individual is unsuccessful at managing chronic

work-related stress. The results of burnout are caused by an imbalance of resources and imposed obligations (Puertas et al., 2019).

### ***Emotional Exhaustion***

Maslach and Jackson (1981) described emotional exhaustion as being depleted of emotional resources and an inability to invest in circumstances at a psychological level. Puertas et al. (2019) described emotional exhaustion as the depletion of energy for facing another day. It has been found that teachers who work with highly disruptive students are more likely to experience emotional exhaustion as it relates to low self-efficacy in teaching (Park & Shin, 2020). Emotional exhaustion also occurs in teachers who invest in something more than they receive in return. Some causes of emotional exhaustion are an increased workload of classroom tasks and extracurricular duties, being tasked with extra duties without additional compensation, mandatory trainings, excessive paperwork, and general feelings of loneliness that can come from within the classroom (Cuadrado et al., 2022). Negative feelings form when a teacher spends time planning and creating resources to facilitate a positive environment but are met with disruptive behaviors and a lack of student engagement. Park and Shin (2020) found that less involved teachers also have decreased emotional exhaustion. It is as if these teachers use the coping mechanism of a detached viewpoint about their jobs to protect themselves from the adverse effects that severe disruptions and challenging behaviors have on their mental well-being.

### ***Depersonalization***

Maslach and Jackson (1981) described depersonalization as having a pessimistic and cynical view of a client, patient, or student. Depersonalization is often categorized as a coping mechanism (Seibt & Kreuzfeld, 2021). When exhibiting depersonalization, it may look like the individual with burnout treats others as objects (Puertas et al., 2019). Fu et al. (2021) stated that a

teacher experiencing depersonalization will likely treat others negatively, which can become evident when a teacher has a poor attitude and disposition toward students, parents, and colleagues. Cognitive distance and a pessimistic attitude are two signs of depersonalization. An educator exhibiting depersonalization may overlook the qualities of a student that make them unique and engaging by actively distancing themselves from students (Benita et al., 2019).

### ***Loss of Personal Accomplishment***

A lack of personal accomplishment will result in the individual having negative feelings about personal skills, achievements, and successes (Puertas et al., 2019). Teachers who value strong student-teacher relationships experience a sense of decreased personal accomplishment when working with challenging students who cannot form close relationships with others (Park & Shin, 2020). Special education teachers working with students with EBD have been known to experience lower-quality relationships with these students when compared to other relationships (Koenen et al., 2019).

### **Stress and Burnout of Special Education Teachers**

Most research has shown that teachers leave the profession due to stress and burnout (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Eddy et al., 2019). Stress and burnout for teachers typically occur gradually over time and grow steadily worse (Park & Shin, 2020). Special education teachers have been found to have an increased level of burnout primarily due to less satisfaction from their work and the heavy burden of legal requirements surrounding paperwork (Pavlidou et al., 2022). Hester et al. (2020) described teacher burnout as undergoing stress for a prolonged period while experiencing feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a loss of personal accomplishment. The stress and burnout that teachers experience can create problems due to the lack of quality education that they provide and increased dissatisfaction with their job and

performance; these factors increase the likelihood of teachers leaving their positions. Stress and burnout can also have a negative impact on students' academic achievement (Eddy et al., 2019; Räsänen et al., 2020). Prolonged stress often leads to teachers resorting to harsher behavior management strategies, which can create a detrimental cycle of escalating student misbehaviors and heightened teacher stress.

Finding relevant predictors for intent to leave relative to special education teachers who work with students with severe disabilities or EBD could potentially lower teacher attrition rates. Jeon et al. (2022) used the Job Demands and Resources model to understand teachers' job burnout and psychological stress and how to reduce it. Job demands refer to physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects required to maintain a particular job, while resources refer to job and personal resources (Bakker & de Vries, 2021). Jeon et al. (2022) mentioned that increased job demands can deteriorate one's health due to physical and psychological depletion. Healthy physical and psychological well-being for teachers is essential and noteworthy because it impacts their behavior in the classroom and teaching practices, which in turn influences the students. In general, increased job demands result in higher levels of burnout and psychological stress (Jeon et al., 2022). Special education teachers tasked with instructing students who have severe disabilities or EBD are confronted with heightened occupational demands due to their dual responsibility of concurrently administering behavior management strategies to students and regulating their emotional states (Guikas & Morin, 2021). Alongside managing behaviors and teaching, special education teachers are also likely to have custodial and managerial tasks, a perceived lack of job success, and work overload, all while having to constantly support their students with significant needs (Koh, 2022).

### ***Teacher Experience***

Teacher preparation programs typically have a student-teaching portion in which a teaching candidate enters the classroom under the supervision of a certified teacher. Studies have shown that shortening the time spent in a student-teaching assignment increases the likelihood of a teacher leaving the profession early in their career (Reeves et al., 2021; Wojcik et al., 2023). A minimum of 10 weeks is recommended for a student-teaching placement while a candidate completes a preservice program because it may increase future success (Denton & Heiney-Smith, 2020). Novice teachers with five or fewer years of experience tend to have higher levels of stress and burnout than more experienced teachers (Stark & Koslouski, 2021). Teachers often experience burnout due to the inconsistency between investment and outcome (Pavlidou et al., 2022). Identifying factors for stress and burnout and measuring them in teachers could be essential for understanding what causes the phenomenon of teacher attrition and reducing the economic costs that result from it (Eddy et al., 2019).

Teacher experience and certification level also contribute to teacher burnout. Special education teachers who obtained certification from an alternative program are more likely to experience stress due to emotional demands (Stark & Koslouski, 2021). Other factors contributing to teacher burnout are lacking administrative support, heavy workloads, and conflict with colleagues (Hester et al., 2020). One of the biggest challenges a new teacher faces is managing complex behaviors in the classroom. When examining special education teachers who work with students with severe disabilities or EBD, the factors that contribute to burnout tend to increase. Henderson et al. (2005) stated that teachers of students with EBD are the most likely to leave the field of education due to instructional and student management challenges. While a beginning teacher may know about classroom management strategies, it can take years to successfully choose and implement proper interventions (Pavlidou & Alevriadou, 2022). Other

factors that lead to burnout among special education teachers of students with severe disabilities or EBD are a lack of sense of professional success, slow student progress, unrealistic parental expectations, administrative expectations, limited resources, lack of planning time, and feelings of isolation (Eddy et al., 2019; Jovanović et al., 2019). Conflicting ideas can emerge when looking at the common factors that lead to teacher attrition. In some studies, a lack of administrative support is the leading cause of burnout and teacher attrition; other studies report that instructional and management challenges are to blame (Dos Santos, 2021; Henderson et al., 2005). This proposed study explored these factors to gather evidence about these statements.

### ***Teacher Assignments***

Special education services are provided on a spectrum to meet students' needs. Most students with disabilities are educated with their general education peers in inclusion settings. Students with more severe disabilities are often educated in a separate setting for varying amounts of the school day. The classroom setting of a special educator is a significant factor in teacher attrition. Special education teachers of students with EBD are known to leave the field of special education at much higher rates than special education teachers of students with other learning disabilities (McFarland-Whisman et al., 2023). Student behavior significantly triggers teacher distress, leading to job dissatisfaction (Eddy et al., 2019). An important finding is that burnout is often viewed as the least severe of the two and is often underestimated. An improper appreciation for burnout can be misguided, leaving individuals under the impression that they do not need treatment for the symptoms of burnout. Individuals may wait until they are diagnosed with depression before finding help and getting treatment. Another challenge that special education teachers face is working cohesively with general education teachers. Gaining insight from teachers' lived experiences may offer insights into how to provide better support for both

general and special education teachers. Mason-Williams et al. (2020) explained that, in many instances, special education teachers feel undervalued by their colleagues in terms of what is contributed to instruction, and they often have trouble negotiating their caseloads and when they can be pulled for intervention services. Student placement in self-contained classes may vary according to how much they are educated in general education settings. Due to scheduling, special and general education teachers may find it nearly impossible to plan together.

### ***Physical Injuries of Teachers***

Special education teachers who serve students with severe disabilities or EBD have many duties beyond educating the students in the traditional sense. Many students with severe disabilities have physical disabilities that limit their ability to control themselves, decrease coordination, and make it difficult to adjust and adapt (Cheng et al., 2016). The duties of a special education teacher may include lifting and carrying students, repositioning students to prevent bedsores and improve comfort, assisting with toileting, changing diapers, feeding, prolonged standing, and pushing wheelchairs. Due to the nature of some disabilities and medications, students may be overweight and have abnormal muscle tone, which can make a special education teacher's duty more strenuous.

Cheng et al. (2016) found that teachers experience work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WRMD) ranging between 39% and 95% from typical teacher-related tasks such as prolonged standing, writing on the board, and paperwork. Special education teachers responsible for physically assisting students experience increased work-related musculoskeletal disorders, specifically lower back pain. Cheng et al. found that approximately 85% of special education teachers who worked with students with severe disabilities with physical limitations were found to have experienced WRMD. Special education teachers who held a teaching assignment for

over 66 months experience greater occurrences of WRMD. Lower back, wrist, and shoulder pain were the most reported injuries. These injuries primarily resulted from persistent, repetitive movements while assisting the students and experiencing work overload. Ahmad et al. (2022) described these injuries as ergonomic injuries. Ergonomic injuries occur when an individual performs tasks in awkward positions and repetitive motions that cause the muscles, tendons, and ligaments to be overused, resulting, over time, in discomfort and disability.

Student-inflicted injuries to staff are another growing concern. Schofield et al. (2019) researched staff injuries that resulted from staff-student interaction. The six most frequently occurring interactions between staff and students that resulted in physical injury were acting out, breaking up fights, restraining students, incidental, daily life events, and play-related occurrences.

### ***Student Variables***

Park and Shin (2020) explained special education teacher burnout by breaking it down into three variables: student-related variables, teacher-related variables, and school-related variables. Student-related variables include demographic information, caseload size, socioeconomic status, type of disability, and behaviors. Teacher-related variables include the demographic information of the teacher, self-efficacy, experience, education, work ethic, and coping ability. School-related variables include support personnel, environment, resources, and support. Park and Shin found that a student's disability had the most significant impact on teacher burnout compared to all other variables. Specifically, teachers of students with emotional disorders experienced a higher level of burnout. The elevated level was due to an inability to control the classroom because of problematic student behaviors. Teachers with less classroom



control experience higher levels of stress and burnout. Additionally, Park and Shin determined that teachers with the least experience had higher burnout levels.

The disability and characteristics of the students being taught directly correlate to teacher burnout (Jovanović et al., 2019). For example, Jovanović et al. (2019) found that teachers who educate students with autism have a higher level of burnout than those who work with students with intellectual disabilities. The age of the students and class size also correlates with stress and burnout experienced by teachers. Teachers working with students with physical limitations and motor disorders may become more physically exhausted than other teachers (Jovanović et al., 2019). There is limited research concerning teachers who work with students who have physical disabilities or EBD regarding stress and burnout. Most research is generalized toward all those in the teaching profession or all special education teachers. The population of teachers who serve students with physical disabilities or EBD face unique challenges, and their sources of stress may differ from other special education teachers who teach students with intellectual disabilities or specific learning disabilities.

### ***Organizational Factors***

Organizational climate plays a major role when defining the parameters affecting the burnout experienced by special education teachers (Lavian, 2012). Organizational climate is defined by Lavian (2012) as the perceptions that members of an organization share that reflect how those members describe and interpret the environment of that organization. School climate refers to the internal atmosphere that the members experience within the educational setting. Lavian identifies two main aspects of organizational climate that exacerbate teacher burnout. The first is the lack of clarity regarding the details of a job and what the job responsibilities entail. A lack of clarity occurs when teachers are not provided with enough detailed information

concerning their rights, obligations, and responsibilities. The second aspect of organizational climate that can become problematic is role conflict. Lavian describes role conflict as occurring when a teacher is expected to simultaneously follow multiple inconsistent systems of role behaviors within a school. Problems with teachers' clarity and role conflicts create on-the-job stress, which Lavian describes as the incompatibility between an individual and their environment. A lack of harmony causes work stress when there is opposition between an educator's ability and professional demands in juxtaposition with the lack of support and assistance given to an educator within the school environment.

### ***Nonwork Factors***

Stress and burnout are not always a direct result of the environment at a school or job-related duties. Outside factors can also play a part in stress and burnout among teachers. Jovanović et al. (2019) found that teachers with families and spouses experience less stress because they can depend on those personal resources for emotional, social, and financial support. Research has shown that teachers are not likely to leave the profession due to dissatisfaction with pay or personal reasons, such as pregnancy (Price & Collett, 2012). Single or divorced teachers have expressed lower levels of perceived personal accomplishment (Jovanović et al., 2019). Life events can prevent an individual from progressing through Maslow's hierarchy of needs. For example, a death in the family, divorce, or results from a global pandemic can all cause individuals to fluctuate between the tiers within the hierarchy (Jones et al., 2021).

### ***Low Salary***

In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, physiological and safety needs are the first needs that must be satisfied for a person to live out their potential. An income is needed to provide food, water, and shelter to meet physiological and safety needs. If a lower income level cannot provide

basic personal needs, teachers may be more likely to leave their jobs in favor of opportunities that will help them fulfill those needs.

### **Teacher Preparation and Qualifications**

One of the critical issues causing special education teacher shortages is low enrollment rates in preparation programs. The specific details of different special education teacher preparation programs may vary, but programs are generally geared toward training teachers to educate students with disabilities and to acquire state licensure. There may be an inclusion course study and an adaptive course study in the preparation programs. Billingsley and Bettini (2019) noted that each program may differ. For example, some programs may be more comprehensive, while others have fewer requirements and provide alternative pathways to obtaining licensure. Shortages in teacher candidates have been an issue for many years. There is an increasing disparity between the number of students identified with special needs and the availability of candidates who have completed teacher preparation programs, particularly in the case of students with severe disabilities and EBD (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019). In response to the teacher shortage, many districts around the nation have attempted to implement programs and give incentives to recruit new teachers. Efforts to address teacher shortages include allowing professionals from other fields to enter teaching as a mid-career switch, providing alternative certification programs, recruiting teacher candidates from other countries, and providing financial incentives such as bonuses or student loan forgiveness (Harris et al., 2019). Many of these efforts have been unsuccessful. Teachers who enter the profession through an alternative certification program are often less effective than formally trained teachers. They are also more likely to leave the profession at higher rates than teachers who went through a preparatory program while in college (Harris et al., 2019).

### ***Lack of Training***

Preparation programs lack exposure and flexibility to the many diverse jobs a special education teacher may acquire (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). The job duties of special education teachers may vary drastically depending on the students' needs. Students may be identified as having one disability, while others may have multiple diagnoses. There are also many different service models across the continuum of least restrictive environments that are geared toward the education of students with disabilities. Some examples of least restrictive environments include co-teaching, resource rooms, small groups, and self-contained settings. The setting in which a teacher chooses to work will determine which certifications are necessary. While preparation programs cover different settings in terms of course material, the options for experiencing each type of setting prior to completion of a program are not always available (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). In contrast, nursing candidates typically experience different units and positions before graduating from a preparatory program, giving them a better understanding of their choices. Jovanović et al. (2019) stated that teacher candidates should examine their initial expectations regarding student progress, especially when preparing to work with students who have physical and developmental disabilities. In many cases, future teachers may have grand expectations that cannot be achieved.

### ***Recruitment***

Mason-Williams et al. (2020) brought a critical issue regarding recruitment of teacher candidates which concerns future special education teachers of color. In some instances, people of color face barriers in attempting college, resulting in low higher education enrollment rates. Additionally, some preparation programs seemingly push out people of color, lowering the enrollment rate for potential teachers of color and fostering a disproportionate student body

demographic. Lastly, students of color attending teacher preparation programs statistically have lower graduation rates than their white peers.

### ***Supervision of Paraprofessionals***

Within the special education self-contained classroom, the staff usually consists of a special education teacher and one or more paraprofessionals. Working with paraprofessionals is an integral part of a special education teacher's job. Yet, teachers are rarely prepared to supervise and work with paraprofessionals in a way that will improve student achievement. In many preparation programs, the topic is covered, but no competency requirements exist (Biggs et al., 2019). Regarding paraprofessionals, a few of the responsibilities that a special education teacher may encounter upon entering a self-contained classroom include delegating tasks, creating and managing schedules, leading orientation for new paraprofessionals, providing training regarding instructional strategies and other information about students' disabilities, and evaluating paraprofessionals' performances.

Special education teacher preparation programs differ from general education teacher preparation programs. Special education preparation programs must adapt to continuously changing policies and structures of special education (Theobald et al., 2021). Theobald et al. (2021) conducted a study to explore what preservice experiences predict whether a preservice teacher will enter the workforce and whether they will stay in the field. They found that teacher candidates supervised by qualified special education teachers during their practice teaching experiences were likelier to enter the workforce. Therefore, the details of student teaching experiences and the supervising teachers impact the outcomes of teacher candidates' careers.

### **Teacher Coping**

High attrition rates and burnout of special education teachers are known problems that have been studied for years, yet they continue to plague the educational field. It is believed that teacher effectiveness and self-efficacy increase over time, increasing the likelihood that a teacher will remain in the profession. This has proven to be an inaccurate indicator. When new teachers enter the profession, they often intend to stay in the field beyond the first five years. However, many leave during this initial period for various reasons, including stress and burnout (Scott et al., 2022). Individuals with high self-efficacy can evaluate their abilities and strategize for enhancement. This sense of efficacy also influences how individuals perceive learning opportunities. During the learning process, experiences create a feedback loop wherein the perception of learning opportunities affects self-efficacy. This, in turn, shapes the individual's approach to tasks, including their effort, persistence, resilience, and emotional responses such as anxiety. Consequently, those with high self-efficacy likely approach tasks from a different standpoint than those with low self-efficacy (Mathews et al., 2023). Many factors contribute to teacher stress, which can be challenging to remedy. Eddy et al. (2019) pointed out that two different educators may perceive environmental demands differently based on their beliefs about their capability to adapt to change and work ethic. While one educator may experience elevated stress from managing student behavior, another may thrive in the challenge. These human differences make it difficult to solve to reduce the overall stress levels of teachers. In the case of beginning special education teachers, many lack the knowledge and skills to work with the high demands of students with special needs. They may also have unrealistic job expectations (Scott et al., 2022).

### *Interpersonal Competences*

Pavlidou et al. (2022) examined interpersonal coping strategies for teachers' characteristics and burnout factors and found a correlation between the two. Greater interpersonal competencies often occurred with more effective ways to address stress and burnout. Interpersonal competencies are defined in relation to teachers as being able to interact and communicate with others successfully. While a teacher may go through a teacher preparation program to gain the proper education to teach, interpersonal skills are not always transferred from education to work (Pavlidou & Alevriadou, 2022). Special education teachers' interpersonal competencies are significant in creating a conducive environment for students to develop academic, emotional, and social skills. The seven coping strategies explored within interpersonal competencies are ignore/avoid, delegate, confer, comply, consult, legislate, and retaliate/conflict. The gender of the teachers also had an impact on the strategies and how they were used. Some coping strategies were strongly associated with burnout, while others were not. For example, strategies based on aggression and avoidance were associated with burnout, while compliance and conferring reduced burnout. The coping strategy of compliance means retreating and accepting a proposed solution. The coping strategy of conferring means to negotiate and exchange views. Building strong interpersonal relationships with colleagues and administrations can decrease stress and burnout, which results in less probability of attrition (Gilmour et al., 2023; Pavlidou et al., 2022). Developing emotional and interpersonal skills can help reduce the risks associated with burnout.

### ***Mindfulness***

While research has shown that many efforts are placed in professional development and teacher mentoring to increase teacher retention, Price and Collett (2012) found that increased socialization among teachers creates a greater sense of connection and commitment, ultimately

increasing retention. Price and Collett researched the idea of interdependence among staff at a school. Improving staff interactions will increase positive emotions, cohesion, and teacher enthusiasm for their work when making school-wide decisions. The increase in those positive factors leads to greater teacher commitment and retention. Teacher satisfaction and professional investment increase when teachers engage in collective decision-making regarding school-wide policies. Teacher participation also increases commitment and organizational citizenship behaviors while representing the teachers' interests and promoting group relations. When looking through the lens of the theory of emotion and social constructivism, the concept of social interactions among teachers and school culture are major influences on the emotional state of teachers. Teachers who have had positive experiences at their schools are more likely to continue teaching in those placements.

Social support directly correlates with mindfulness and burnout (Sun et al., 2019a). Sun et al. (2019a) described mindfulness as reaching a state of consciousness by intentionally attending to experiences happening in the current moment without judgment. Mindfulness involves an engaged process in which attention is directed toward fostering self-awareness, facilitating insightful reflection, and cultivating focused concentration (Neumann & Tillott, 2022). Special education teachers with more mindfulness are less likely to experience burnout (Sun et al., 2019b). Special education teachers who have increased mindfulness can focus on present experiences and be aware of their social support, reducing stress and burnout when using social support to help cope. Vygotsky's social constructivist theory is based on forming knowledge from a person's surrounding social interactions and cultural settings. The school's social culture and the teachers' social interactions will significantly impact the stress levels that teachers may experience. A positive school culture with high social interactions between



teachers will create stronger relationships and decrease negative feelings of isolation. Perceived social support is known to have a mediating effect on the psychological well-being of an individual, meaning that the individual believes that assistance would be provided through their social relationship if they were to need it (Sun et al., 2019a). The social constructivist includes relational factors in that emotions are affected by person-environmental relationships.

### **Potential Solutions**

A teacher's salary is humble and can be unappealing to many as there is little chance of advancement or salary increase. Public education typically has a fixed salary scale for certified teachers based on experience, such as one's previous years of teaching. A special education teacher may be compensated for working in a challenging environment outside the school setting. However, due to a fixed salary scale, there is no change in wages for working in environments that are more challenging and stressful. In most cases, all teachers will receive the same pay according to their district and level of experience regardless of their job duty requirements (Feng & Sass, 2018). A fixed salary scale allows some teachers to have relatively easy workloads. In contrast, others may have an extremely challenging and heavy workload even though compensation for both groups remains the same. Special education, math, and science can be challenging to staff within the public school system. In some states, wage increases for understaffed areas have helped to decrease the shortage of available teachers and to increase retention rates. In other states, various compensation programs are designed to attract teachers and diminish shortages in those hard-to-staff areas; compensation programs can include student loan forgiveness and scholarship programs. For example, the U.S. Department of Education will forgive up to \$17,500 in student loans for special education, math, and science teachers after teaching in a Title I school for five years (Feng & Sass, 2018). Other state compensation

programs include one-time signing bonuses, moving expense reimbursement, and retention bonuses.

Perceived flaws in teacher compensation programs have limited the success of efforts to combat teacher shortages. Many of these programs are temporary, especially sign-on bonus incentives and gradual pay increases over time (Feng & Sass, 2018). While signing bonuses or moving expense reimbursements will initially attract and benefit new teachers, these benefits do not last, and after the benefits expire, teachers may not be likely to stay. In the case of student loan forgiveness, the benefit is only for those with student loan debt. Likewise, retention bonuses may help for a short time, but those programs are not long-term solutions. Bonuses do not count towards an employee's base salary; therefore, yearly pay increases do not reflect the extra money teachers may have received. Addressing the shortage of special education teachers requires a fundamental focus on salary increases as a crucial component of any serious effort (Peyton et al., 2021).

### **Summary**

High attrition rates and burnout of special education teachers are well-explored topics. The problem with grouping all special education teachers is that special education is remarkably diverse. The demands experienced by special education teachers differ from those of general education teachers, who require different resources (Mason-Williams et al., 2020). Demands experienced by special education teachers working in self-contained settings vastly differ from those in inclusion settings. More research is needed to explore the burnout of special education teachers working with students who have severe disabilities or EBD. These teachers face unique challenges in comparison to other teachers. For example, special education teachers working with students with severe disabilities or EBD may be required to focus on behavior management

interventions and life skills throughout the school day rather than the statewide curriculum and performance standards. When working with students who have physical disabilities, a special education teacher may be required to be very hands-on and assist students with non-academic issues such as feeding, toileting, and other daily living skills. In comparison, general education teachers do not typically assist students in these ways, especially students in secondary schools.

Due to vastly different teaching situations, caseloads, and work ethic characteristics, pinpointing the causes of stress and burnout can be exceedingly difficult. Even in similar environments, special education teachers may have different beliefs about their capabilities to adapt to challenges that arise throughout the day, resulting in different experiences of stress and outcomes (Eddy et al., 2019). The theory of emotion is related to how individuals handle stressful situations. Everyone will handle situations in their environment in accordance with their emotions and cultural identity.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

In the study of high attrition rates of special education teachers who instructed students with severe disabilities or emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD), the aim was to find the main causes of attrition and migration among that population of teachers. The proposed qualitative study used a transcendental phenomenology design.

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand why special education teachers who worked with students with severe disabilities or emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) experienced elevated stress levels and burnout, resulting in high attrition and migration rates. High attrition rates were often associated with stress and burnout, and the study's objective was to identify any specific factors that contributed to stress and burnout among individuals (Sass et al., 2011). The setting of the research was the United States, where the participants were recruited through social media platforms. The study was based on the interpretive framework of Maslow's theory of motivation. The procedures matched the principles of Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenology design. The three data collection types used were individual interviews, reflective journals, and focus groups. In addition to the suggested research approach, the issue of trustworthiness, examining credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as key aspects to consider was addressed in this chapter.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research strives to make sense of phenomena in their natural settings while bringing about meaning to them (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This proposed transcendental phenomenological qualitative study aimed to explore the high attrition rates of special education

teachers, why it is happening, what can be done to lower the percentage of teachers leaving the profession, and why some teachers remain in the field. The focus of this study was to specifically explore the lived experiences of special education teachers who work with students with severe disabilities or emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). By examining these experiences, potential causes for the high attrition rates observed among this group of teachers were revealed. A teacher's decision to leave the profession can include personal reasons, making it difficult to pinpoint why attrition rates are so high. In recent studies, high attrition rates of teachers have been linked to stress and burnout (Sass et al., 2011). Understanding why teachers leave the profession can bring concrete meaning to what factors may be causing this phenomenon.

The research design that explored the high attrition rates of special education teachers was a qualitative transcendental phenomenological study. Utilizing a qualitative research design instead of a quantitative one allowed for an in-depth understanding of multiple views and perceptions of special education teachers' experiences in teaching students with severe disabilities or EBD. Qualitative research sought to determine why a phenomenon happened using lived experiences shared by the participants. Quantitative studies tested theories and answered the questions of what occurred and how something occurred. By employing a qualitative approach, the participants could candidly share their experiences, bringing understanding and awareness to the problem. A transcendental phenomenological study was described as finding a common meaning of an experience shared by several individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Using this approach provided an unbiased understanding. The shared experiences in this study were the circumstances that caused special education teachers who educated students with severe disabilities or EBD to become stressed, experience burnout, and leave the profession.

Since the study focused on the participants' experiences, it used a transcendental design

described by Moustakas (1994). Moustakas described transcendental phenomenology as something perceived as having occurred for the first time. It drew on the participants' experience with a fresh set of eyes rather than focusing on the researcher's interpretation. Moustakas (1994) outlined specific steps for implementation during a transcendental phenomenology study. First, the researcher must determine if the research problem is appropriate for a phenomenology study and then identify the phenomenon of the problem. Broad philosophical assumptions must be specified, and then data can be collected from the participants. Once multiple in-depth interviews have been conducted, the researcher should analyze significant statements and generate themes. The last steps are to develop textural and structural descriptions, write a composite description, and present the study in written form.

### **Research Questions**

High attrition rates plague the field of special education. While there are many different causes of teachers leaving their profession, this proposed study focused on teachers working with students with severe disabilities or EBD. These educators face unique challenges that may contribute to high attrition rates.

#### **Central Research Question**

What are the leading causes of attrition and migration among teachers who teach students with severe disabilities or EBD in separate settings outside of the general education population?

#### **Sub-Question One**

What are the primary causes of stress and burnout for special education teachers who teach students with severe disabilities or EBD in separate settings?

#### **Sub-Question Two**

What factors about teaching students with severe disabilities or EBD in separate settings play a role in why teachers remain in or leave their positions?

### **Sub-Question Three**

What interventions, strategies, and teacher supports can help remedy high attrition rates for special education teachers working with students with severe disabilities or EBD?

## **Setting and Participants**

### **Setting**

The setting of the study was the United States. The participants were selected using social media outlets. Using participants in various parts of the nation reduced bias and provided information regarding how different adaptive classrooms functioned. Adaptive classrooms consist of students with the highest needs. Students with the highest needs were called low-incidence learners (LIL). Rude et al. (2005) described LIL as students with disabilities that are not common, such as deafness, blindness, and severe intellectual disabilities. LIL can also include students with severe intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, and students with EBD. Adaptive classrooms consist of one teacher and one or more paraprofessionals. The classes are smaller in size and have different staff-to-students ratios than inclusive classrooms due to the high needs of the students. Special education teachers from adaptive classrooms made up the study participants.

### **Participants**

Participants were selected using a voluntary response sampling method from social media outlets. The selected participants consisted of special education teachers currently instructing students with severe disabilities or EBD or those who had previously instructed this population. Participation was entirely voluntary. The study included 10 participants. The eligibility

requirements for participation in this study included adaptive special education teachers who were currently teaching in a separate setting within the United States or those who had moved from a separate setting position within the past two years. Adaptive special education teachers who had moved from the position could include those who had left the profession or migrated to other settings. Teachers of all primary and secondary educational levels could participate. The participants were required to have had experience with educating students who had severe disabilities or EBD. Active teachers also had to have a valid teaching certificate from the state where they were employed.

### **Recruitment Plan**

To recruit participants, I implemented voluntary response sampling. Voluntary response sampling produces a sample population of participants who have voluntarily chosen to participate in the research and typically have an opinion about the issue (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020). The goal was to recruit 10 to 15 participants. Using a voluntary response sample resulted in a sample group that consisted of 10 teachers who had similar, strong feelings toward the subject matter. To recruit participants, I advertised on a Facebook group specifically for special education teachers who teach in a self-contained setting. The group was comprised of 41,000 teachers. I received permission from the group administrator (see Appendix D). The Facebook group served as a platform to connect with individuals with relevant experience in this field. A carefully crafted post was shared within the group, outlining the purpose of the study, its significance, and the opportunity for participants to contribute to the research. Interested members were encouraged to voluntarily participate by completing a brief questionnaire or expressing their interest via direct message. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured throughout the individual interviews and completion of journal responses, and the findings were



used to inform strategies aimed at mitigating attrition and burnout within this specialized teaching context. It is important to note that complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. Once the group members expressed interest, a letter was sent to the potential participants to secure volunteers (see Appendix B). Each volunteer had to meet the eligibility guidelines outlined in the letter and agree to the requirements of the study.

### **Researcher Positionality**

My motivations for conducting this study revolved around my current placement as an adaptive special education teacher of students with severe disabilities or EBD and around my son, who was born with multiple disabilities. I have taught in the adaptive setting for seven of my 10 years as an educator. Working with students who have severe disabilities or EBD has been a very taxing experience. Many colleagues leave and return to inclusion settings or other teaching positions, such as transition specialists and general education teachers. In the district where I work, there is a shortage of adaptive special education teachers, resulting in out-of-compliance caseloads. The district contracts with a company to hire internationally to fill vacant positions. Contracted individuals often have little to no experience working with students with significant medical, physical, or emotional needs. The issues of staffing shortages, increased caseloads, lack of support, and hiring individuals who lack experience and certifications genuinely concern me about the future of special education. It also tells us that schools cannot fill these positions with candidates within the United States.

### **Interpretive Framework**

This research sought to understand how the social, cultural, and collaborative practices within the educational environment affected special education teachers' experiences, perceptions, and decisions regarding their professional longevity through the social constructivist perspective.

Using an interpretive framework, this study analyzed qualitative data collected through interviews, focus groups, and reflective journals. The interpretive lens of social constructivism guided the analysis by focusing on the social, cultural, and interactive aspects that contributed to special education teachers' experiences and decisions regarding attrition. In this study, participants interacted with the researcher to construct meaning for their situations, which was the unique teaching position in adaptive settings. Social interactions, cultural contexts, and the educational system shape individual experiences. Adopting this lens aimed to uncover the factors contributing to high attrition rates and shed light on the complex dynamics between teachers, students, and the educational environment.

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

Philosophical assumptions include ontological, epistemological, and axiological characteristics. Each philosophical assumption had a different impact on this study. Each participant's perspectives were likely to be different due to their experiences with the environment and people around them. The unique experiences of each participant shaped the philosophical assumptions.

#### ***Ontological Assumption***

In my study as a special education teacher in adaptive settings, I realized I had different realities for common situations and placements than others. My interactions with others and my unique experiences shaped my perspective. Understanding the ontology of teaching was crucial as it helped me explain the encounters and lived experiences between myself and my students. While teaching is often seen as a result of student academic achievements, I believe it should be seen and understood as an experience. As a Christian, I believe that the idea of God becomes a reality when I acknowledge the existence of God. However, I also acknowledge that I do not

know all of the things as a human. Regarding motivation, Maslow's theory encompasses the idea of spirituality as the highest need in the hierarchy of needs (Papaleontiou-Louca et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the overall theory primarily focuses on promoting a self-focused process of individual development.

In my study, I appreciated the intricate and multifaceted nature of the phenomenon through the ontological assumption I adopted. I acknowledged that the attrition rates of special education teachers working with students with severe disabilities and EBD could not be solely reduced to objective statistics. Instead, they were influenced by subjective interpretations, social interactions, and contextual factors. By embracing this ontological perspective, I recognized that the reality of attrition rates was socially constructed and shaped by the experiences, perceptions, and interactions of the educational system's teachers, administrators, students, and other stakeholders. My research investigated subjective experiences to understand the social context surrounding attrition rates. I aimed to explore the shared meanings attributed to the challenges faced by special education teachers. By embracing this ontological assumption, I was committed to uncovering a more comprehensive understanding of the factors impacting attrition rates and the lived experiences of these educators.

### ***Epistemological Assumption***

The epistemological assumption is crucial as it guided my understanding of what constitutes knowledge, how knowledge claims are justified, and, more specifically, the relationship between myself as the researcher and the subject of my research (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In my qualitative research, I embraced an epistemology that emphasized getting as close as possible to the participants. As the researcher, I strived to become an insider, immersing myself in the participants' world to minimize the distance between what I observed and who I

was as the observer. This approach allowed me to comprehend better the subjective experiences that varied from participant to participant (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In this study, I conducted interviews to dive into the occurrences of participants' subjective experiences. Given the unique nature of the adaptive special education setting, I anticipated each participant would offer a distinct outlook and experience. I aimed to gather comprehensive and rich data from each participant to identify any commonalities or shared perspectives about their experiences. Through this exploration, I hope to gain insights into the participants' subjective realities and uncover any underlying themes or patterns that may emerge from their narratives.

In my study, I recognized the importance of the epistemological assumption in achieving a comprehensive understanding of attrition and its contributing factors. I acknowledged that obtaining knowledge about attrition requires exploring subjective experiences, perceptions, and interpretations. I valued using qualitative research methods such as interviews, focus groups, and reflective journals to capture this phenomenon's nuanced and context-specific aspects. By embracing this epistemological perspective, I aimed to gain valuable insights into the lived experiences of special education teachers. I sought to understand their motivations, challenges, and the complex factors contributing to high attrition rates. This approach prioritized the voices and perspectives of teachers and other stakeholders, recognizing their expertise and experiences as essential sources of knowledge. Through qualitative methods, I endeavored to generate rich and meaningful knowledge that can inform the development of effective strategies and interventions to address attrition within the specific educational context studied. By valuing the diverse perspectives and experiences of individuals involved, I hope to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of attrition and work towards creating positive changes in special education teacher retention.

### *Axiological Assumption*

As the researcher in this study, I acknowledged the significance of the axiological assumption, allowing me to shape the narrative by sharing my values and interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This assumption pertained to what was considered knowledge, how knowledge claims were justified, and the relationship between myself as the researcher and the subject of my research. It was essential to recognize that bias could emerge when embracing axiological assumptions, and readers needed to be aware of this potential bias. In this study, my background as a special education teacher formed the foundation of my understanding. However, I acknowledged that my personal experiences introduced the possibility of subjective interpretations and preferences influencing various aspects of the research process.

Given my firsthand experiences with the challenges and realities of teaching in this context, there was a risk that my subjective lens shaped the research design, data collection, and analysis. The selection of research questions, data sources, and the emphasis on specific factors contributing to attrition rates might have been influenced by my personal experiences and beliefs. To mitigate this potential bias, I was committed to employing rigorous research methodologies, adhering to ethical standards, and engaging in critical self-reflection throughout the research process. By being transparent about my background and acknowledging the potential influence of my perspectives, I aimed to provide readers with a clear understanding of the context and potential biases present in this study.

My study embraced the axiological assumption that recognized the inherent value and importance of addressing the issue of high attrition rates among special education teachers who worked with students with severe disabilities and EBD. I deeply understood the significance of understanding and mitigating the challenges these dedicated teachers face and the vulnerable

student populations they serve. From this axiological perspective, I firmly believe that research on attrition rates should not be pursued solely for knowledge but should also strive to positively impact the lives of teachers, students, and the wider educational community. It emphasized the need for research findings to inform policy and practice, leading to the development of supportive and sustainable strategies that could enhance teacher retention, improve the educational experiences of students with severe disabilities and emotional behavioral disorders, and foster equitable access to quality education for all. This axiological assumption placed great value on conducting research that contributed to positive social change and meaningful improvement within the field of special education. By aligning my research with these values, I aimed to generate insights that had real-world implications, promoted effective interventions, and ultimately created a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for special education teachers and their students.

### **Researcher's Role**

In the conducted study, I served as the human instrument, taking on the roles of both a researcher and a fellow special education teacher. I occupied a teaching position similar to those held by the participants included in the study's population. Our job descriptions were similar, we taught a comparable curriculum, and our caseloads could be similar. A bias was present as I could relate to these teachers. Despite my ability to relate to the participants, ensuring that my opinions did not influence the interviews was essential. The questions posed during the interviews might have reflected issues encountered while teaching in an adaptive special education setting.

### **Procedures**

The procedures for this study followed the necessary steps that should be taken in order

to comply with research standards set forth by Liberty University. This section encompassed various aspects, including acquiring site permissions, obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, participant recruitment, data collection, data analysis, data presentation, and explaining how to achieve triangulation within the study. The proposed procedures were also guided by Moustakas's (1994) insights regarding conducting studies with a transcendental phenomenology design.

The data collection occurred in the following order: individual interviews, reflective journals, and focus groups. The interviews were held and recorded using Microsoft Teams and took about 30 minutes each. The participants were made aware of being recorded before volunteering to participate in the study. There were no instances where an individual was not comfortable being recorded. The interviews were transcribed using Microsoft 365 software within Word. There were 11 primary questions and 18 sub-questions. Once the interviews were complete, they were analyzed for themes using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Once individual interviews had been conducted, the participants were emailed a link to complete a journal prompt via Google Forms.

Focus groups were formed based on similar characteristics of the participants' settings. For example, groupings could be based on the primary demographic of students, class size, school size, and district size. The meetings were held and recorded using Microsoft Teams. The focus groups were transcribed using Microsoft 365 software within Word. There was a total of five questions that were asked during the focus group interviews. Discussions between the participants were facilitated by the researcher. The focus group interviews took approximately 30 minutes. Once the focus group interviews were complete, they were analyzed for themes using a four-step coding process.

## **Data Collection Plan**

The data collection approach included individual interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups. These three forms of data collection approaches gave very informative data about each teacher's experience and created data triangulation. Data collection began with participants participating in individual interviews, completing a journal prompt, and concluding with the focus groups. Individual interviews gave rich, detailed, and contextually grounded data, allowing researchers to explore participants' perspectives and experiences in-depth. Journal prompts were valuable tools, allowing participants to engage in reflective and introspective thinking. This study collected journal prompts before the focus groups because they encouraged participants to reflect individually before interacting with others in a group setting. They allowed participants to gather their thoughts, recall relevant experiences, and express their perspectives and insights in a private and uninfluenced manner. Focus groups were vital because they facilitated group dynamics, the social construction of meaning, and the exploration of shared experiences and group norms. They stimulated discussion, generated diverse perspectives, and offered opportunities for data triangulation. Focus groups provided valuable insights that may not have emerged in individual interviews and allowed researchers to explore the collective understanding and dynamics surrounding the research topic.

### **Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach**

Individual interviews are described by Creswell and Poth (2016) as collecting data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. In this case, the individuals included in the pool of participants had experienced stress and burnout related to teaching students with severe disabilities or EBD. According to Moustakas (1994), there should be two broad, general questions regarding what participants experienced and the context of the situation that affected



the experience. The use of semi-structured interviews was proposed instead of structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are interviews with a set of guiding questions. However, the overall flow of an interview is determined by dialogue and exchange between the interviewer and the participant rather than directly scripted by a set of questions (Lyons & Coyle, 2007). Common characteristics of a semi-structured interview included establishing rapport with a participant, expanding on interesting ideas that arose, placing less importance on the ordering of the questions, and delving into the interests or concerns of a participant as they pertained to the study. Interviews were held virtually using Microsoft Teams. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Team and Microsoft 365 software within Word. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes.

#### *Individual Interview Questions*

1. Describe your educational background and career through your current position. CRQ
  - a. How many students are/were in your class, and what is the range of disabilities you serve? SQ1
  - b. How do you feel about your current job placement? SQ1
  - c. What other types of settings have you worked in, and how do they compare to the adaptive setting? CRQ
2. Describe your challenges when working with students with severe disabilities or EBD in your classes. SQ1
  - a. Describe any feelings of isolation in your current position. SQ1
  - b. Describe the kinds of support and equipment/tools to serve your students. SQ2
3. Describe successful practices you use when working with students with severe disabilities or EBD in your classes. SQ1

- a. How do you feel about your students' progress? SQ2
- b. Describe your relationship with the families of the students. SQ2
4. Describe professional development experiences that have prepared you to work with students with severe disabilities or EBD as a teacher. SQ1
  - a. What did you find helpful about professional development? SQ3
  - b. What professional development experiences do you feel would be beneficial for your position? SQ3
5. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences with students with severe disabilities or EBD that we have not discussed? SQ1
6. Describe the support you have in your class from paraprofessionals and administration for students in your classes. SQ1
  - a. How would you describe your administration? SQ2
  - b. Describe the level of support and how they make you feel. SQ1
7. Describe times of stress and burnout as well as times of joy in your current position. SQ1
  - a. Describe times you have had to take work home or work beyond school hours. SQ1
  - b. Describe any time you have felt exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. CRQ
  - c. Describe feelings of exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment prior to the onset of the global pandemic of Covid-19? CRQ
  - d. Describe feelings of dissatisfaction with your job, a lack of support, being overwhelmed by student needs, unmanageable job duties, or the feeling of disempowerment. CRQ

e. Describe feelings of satisfaction with your job and the reasons why you feel this way.

SQ3

8. Describe a time you considered leaving the profession or transferring to a different position or district and what caused it. SQ2

a. Describe where you see yourself in the next year. Describe where you see yourself in the next five years? CRQ

9. Describe any problems you have encountered while serving in the adaptive setting. SQ2

a. Describe any work-related problems that cause stress in your personal life? SQ1

b. Describe your planning and lunch break? SQ1

10. What else can be done to alleviate stress and burnout as a special education teacher of students with severe disabilities and EBD? SQ3

11. Describe positives about working with students with severe disabilities and EBD? SQ3

12. What else would you like to contribute to this important study? CRQ

Question one aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs tier of self-actualization and gives general information about the participants' educational background and current teaching position. Self-actualization is the highest level of the hierarchy, representing fulfilling a person's potential and pursuing self-improvement, innovation, and self-fulfillment to become their best version. Self-actualization may be seen in how the participants' education, background, and career choices have contributed to personal fulfillment. Job satisfaction reflects an individual's level of fulfillment beyond their basic and lower-level needs. Generally, a person who is happy with their job placement is experiencing a sense of self-actualization, while a person who is unhappy with their job placement is not getting their needs met.

Question two aligns with multiple tiers of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: physiological, safety, and a sense of belonging. Students who have severe disabilities may have physical and medical conditions that require attention and support from the special education teacher. The special education teacher must ensure that the students' physiological needs are met, which is crucial for their well-being and engagement in learning. This also includes support and equipment that the students need to maintain their health and safety. Facilitating a safe classroom environment may become challenging when working with students with an EBD. When discussing feelings of isolation, this relates to the tier of a sense of belonging.

Question three aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs tiers of love and belongingness, self-esteem, and self-actualization. Finding successful strategies when working with students with severe disabilities and EBD can enhance a special education teacher's self-esteem and self-actualization while contributing to the student's needs within the hierarchy. Working with this student population with complex needs may require multiple trials and strategies. Seeing students' progress will increase the teacher's professional self-esteem and competence while promoting growth to self-actualization. The relationship between the teacher and the families of the students addresses the tier of love and belonging. It is important to build positive and supportive connections between the teachers and students' families, creating an environment of collaboration, trust, and mutual understanding.

Question four aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs tiers of self-esteem and self-actualization. A special education teacher who engages in professional development demonstrates a commitment to self-improvement and personal growth. Question five could address any of the tiers in Maslow's hierarchy of needs depending on what the participant chooses to share. Question six aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs tier of love and

belongingness. When considering the support from administration and paraprofessionals, it is focused on social dynamics. It highlights the importance of collaborative relationships, teamwork, and belonging within the educational context. Question seven aligns with all of Maslow's hierarchy of needs tiers. When discussing stress and burnout, physiological and safety needs are directly correlated. Feelings of joy are closely related to the tiers of belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization.

Question eight aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs tiers of self-actualization and self-esteem. Leaving the profession or transferring to a different position or district reflects personal satisfaction, career fulfillment, and the pursuit of self-actualization. It signifies a desire for a better fit, greater opportunities for growth, or a more fulfilling professional experience. Various factors may influence the decision to explore other options in one's career. It could be due to a lack of professional growth opportunities, feeling undervalued or unfulfilled in the current position, organizational culture or leadership challenges, or a misalignment between personal values and the work environment. By describing this experience, individuals acknowledge the impact of their work context on their self-esteem and self-actualization needs. It reflects a recognition of the importance of finding a fulfilling professional path that allows for personal growth, achievement, and the realization of one's potential. Exploring alternative career options or considering a transfer signifies the pursuit of self-actualization, seeking opportunities that align more closely with personal values, interests, and aspirations. It demonstrates a commitment to finding a professional environment that nurtures personal growth and provides a sense of fulfillment.

Question nine aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs tier of safety needs. When encountering problems in the adaptive setting, it implies challenges that hinder the fulfillment of

safety needs. These problems could include a lack of resources, insufficient training or support, behavior management difficulties, communication barriers, or safety concerns related to the student's disabilities or emotional and behavioral challenges. By describing these encountered problems, individuals highlight the importance of addressing safety needs in the adaptive setting. Ensuring a safe and supportive environment is crucial for promoting the well-being of both students and teachers. Addressing these challenges creates a conducive learning environment and fosters a sense of security and protection. Resolving these problems aligns with the foundational needs in Maslow's hierarchy, allowing individuals to focus on higher-level needs such as belongingness, self-esteem, and self-actualization. When safety needs are adequately met, it provides a solid foundation for individuals to thrive and fulfill their potential.

Question ten aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which includes the tiers of safety and physiological needs. As a special education teacher working with students with severe disabilities and EBD, the nature of the job can be demanding and emotionally challenging. Alleviating stress and burnout in this context requires addressing specific needs related to the unique challenges of the role. Organizations and educational institutions can address special education teachers' physiological and safety needs by implementing specific strategies. This, in turn, helps alleviate stress and burnout, increasing job satisfaction, well-being, and motivation to continue positively impacting the lives of students with severe disabilities and EBD.

Question eleven aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs tier self-actualization. When describing the positive aspects of working with students with severe disabilities and EBD, individuals highlight the experiences and aspects contributing to their self-actualization. This process involves finding meaning, personal growth, and fulfillment in their work with these students.

### *Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan*

The interviews were transcribed using the software within Microsoft Teams and Microsoft 365 software within Word. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was employed to identify themes within the transcriptions. IPA involved four stages: initial readings of the transcripts, identification and labeling of themes, linking themes, identifying thematic clusters, and producing a summary table of themes (Lyons & Coyle, 2007). In stage one, the transcripts were read and re-read to gain an overall sense of them and to identify any themes. Significant statements, sentences, or quotes that explained how the participants experienced the phenomenon were identified (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This process is referred to as horizontalization by Moustakas (1994). During this stage, connections to the interpretative framework of Maslow's hierarchy of needs were identified, and notes were made in the margins about any text of importance. In the second stage, after the significant statements were identified, clusters of meanings from the statements were transformed into themes. The notes that were made about important statements were used to identify themes. In the third stage, the themes were categorized into thematic clusters. Themes that were very similar or redundant were categorized together. The fourth stage included placing the themes into a table for visual representation.

### **Journal Prompts Data Collection Approach**

Journal prompts were valuable in the qualitative dissertation research as they promoted self-reflection, engaged participants, provided flexibility, uncovered subconscious thoughts, ensured privacy and anonymity, offered longitudinal perspectives, supplemented other data collection methods, and empowered participants. They contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of participants' thoughts, experiences, and perspectives on the research topic. In

this study, participants completed a journal prompt after their individual interview and before the focus group interview, so the other participants did not influence their reflection. The journal prompt was administered via a Google form. The participants had two weeks to complete the journal prompt.

The Journal Prompt (see appendix E) asked the participants to reflect on their experiences as special education teachers working with students who had severe disabilities or EBD in separate settings outside of the general education population and describe a specific incident, situation, or recurring theme that stood out to them and had influenced their decision to either stay in or leave their positions. The participants were to consider multiple viewpoints as they aligned with Maslow's theory of motivation. The first is physiological needs, which might be challenges, stressors, or sources of burnout they had encountered while working with these students in separate settings and how those challenges affected their physical well-being, such as their health, energy levels, or sleep patterns. Second, safety needs included challenges that had impacted their sense of safety and security within their professional role, any concerns related to their or their student's physical or emotional safety, and how these challenges affected their overall job satisfaction and commitment to the profession. The following viewpoint was social needs, influenced by interpersonal dynamics and relationships formed while teaching students with severe disabilities or EBD in separate settings and the support received from colleagues, administrators, or other stakeholders. The fourth viewpoint regarded self-esteem needs and asked the participants to explore the factors contributing to their sense of accomplishment, recognition, and self-worth as special education teachers and how they influenced their overall job satisfaction and commitment to the profession. Lastly, self-actualization could be addressed by reflecting on how teaching students with severe disabilities or EBD in separate settings has



allowed them to fulfill their potential, exercise creativity, and contribute to the well-being of others.

#### *Journal Prompts Data Analysis Plan*

A thematic analysis approach was used to analyze the written journal prompt responses. The process of analysis started by seeking significance and identifying and connecting various meanings. Its purpose was to comprehend the intricacy of meanings within the data rather than simply measuring their occurrence. The analysis entailed the active involvement of the researcher in both the data and the analysis itself. It included searching for patterns in meanings, delving deeper into them, and determining how these patterns could be categorized into themes. Additionally, the analysis was guided by openness, ensuring a reflective process that sheds light on the meaning (Sundler et al., 2019).

A systematic process was followed to conduct a thematic analysis of the journal prompt responses. The process began by familiarizing myself with the data through multiple readings; then, I identified and coded meaningful units of information within the responses. These codes captured key aspects of the participants' experiences and were grouped to form themes. Themes represented recurring patterns or concepts that emerged from the data and reflected the essence of the participants' experiences. The identified themes of the research objectives and phenomenological framework were reviewed, refined, and interpreted. Finally, the thematic analysis findings were reported coherently and meaningfully, providing a deep understanding of the lived experiences in the journal prompt responses.

#### **Focus Groups Data Collection Approach**

Using virtual focus groups in qualitative research provides an opportunity to explore opinions and attributes from populations that may be isolated and difficult to reach (Richard et

al., 2021). The completed study aimed to explore the characteristics and elements of the adaptive special education setting. The adaptive setting differed from the regular education setting, and special education teachers leading these classrooms likely had unique experiences and perspectives that were important for understanding the positive and negative aspects of a specific setting. The virtual focus groups were held via Microsoft Teams, and each group consisted of four to six participants. The focus group meetings lasted approximately 30 minutes each and addressed the opinions and perspectives of the participants through open-ended questions. Microsoft Teams and Microsoft 365 software within Word were used to transcribe the meetings verbatim. The assignment of participants to a specific focus group was based on the similarities of the participants' settings to identify if comparable settings yielded similar feelings.

### ***Focus Group Questions***

1. For any participants who exited the adaptive teaching setting, describe the primary contributing factors. SQ2
2. For the teachers still teaching in the adaptive teaching setting, describe why you stay. SQ2
3. Describe other settings within the school that you have worked in and how it compares to the adaptive setting. CRQ
4. Describe times when you feel stressed while at work and what is causing it. SQ1
5. If you could make a change to your job duties, placement, or special education policy, describe what it would be. SQ3

Questions one and two align with Maslow's hierarchy of needs tiers of self-actualization and self-esteem. Self-actualization refers to realizing one's full potential and pursuing personal growth, creativity, and self-fulfillment. When a special education teacher decides to exit the

adaptive teaching setting, it may be driven by a desire to seek new opportunities, challenge themselves professionally, or explore different areas of interest. This reflects their pursuit of self-actualization by seeking personal growth and realizing their potential in alternative teaching positions or career paths. Teachers who remain in the adaptive teaching setting may find fulfillment in the opportunity to continually learn, develop their skills, and grow as educators. They may find joy in seeing their students progress and achieve milestones and feel a sense of purpose and fulfillment in making a difference in the lives of students with disabilities. The adaptive teaching setting may also provide unique challenges and opportunities for creativity and innovation. Teachers who stay in this setting may appreciate the opportunity to develop adaptive teaching strategies, collaborate with other professionals, and find creative solutions to meet the diverse needs of their students. The need for esteem involves seeking recognition, competence, and positive self-worth. Exiting the adaptive teaching setting may be influenced by factors such as feeling undervalued or unappreciated, limited professional growth or advancement opportunities, or a lack of recognition for their expertise and contributions. Seeking a change in teaching settings may be driven by a desire to be in an environment where their skills, knowledge, and efforts are acknowledged and esteemed. Teachers who continue to work in the adaptive teaching setting may find fulfillment in the recognition and appreciation they receive from their students, colleagues, and the broader community. They may value their impact on the lives of their students with disabilities and the positive feedback they receive for their efforts.

Question three aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs tiers of love, belongingness, and self-esteem. The need for belongingness and love involves the desire to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships, feel connected to others, and be a part of a social group. When comparing other settings within the school to the adaptive setting, teachers may reflect on the

sense of community and connection they experience in each setting. They may consider their level of support, collaboration, and relationships with colleagues, administrators, and other staff members in these different settings. Teachers may compare the level of recognition, respect, and value they receive in different settings within the school. They may consider how their expertise, skills, and contributions are acknowledged and esteemed by colleagues, administrators, and the broader school community compared to the adaptive setting. By reflecting on other settings within the school and comparing them to the adaptive setting, teachers are exploring how these settings fulfill their need for belongingness, love, and esteem. They consider the social connections, support systems, and levels of recognition they experience in these different settings.

Question four aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs tiers of physiological needs and safety needs. Physiological needs refer to the basic biological requirements for survival, such as food, water, and rest. Stress experienced at work can be influenced by factors that impact these physiological needs, such as long working hours, lack of breaks, or inadequate access to food or hydration. Safety needs pertain to the desire for security, stability, and protection. Stress in the workplace can stem from factors that jeopardize or compromise this sense of safety, such as challenging or unsafe working conditions, lack of resources or support, conflicts with colleagues or supervisors, or job insecurity. By exploring the times when stress occurs and its causes, individuals address how their physiological and safety needs are being met or compromised within their work environment. Understanding these factors can help identify areas where improvements are needed to ensure a healthier and more conducive work setting.

Question five aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs tiers of self-actualization and self-esteem. By envisioning changes in job duties, placement, or special education policy, individuals

are tapping into their self-actualization needs by seeking personal growth and aligning their work with their passions and esteem needs by aiming for recognition and a sense of self-worth in their professional role. When considering changes to job duties, placement, or special education policy, individuals may seek opportunities that allow them to maximize their potential, leverage their strengths, and engage in tasks or responsibilities that align with their passions and interests. They may desire a sense of fulfillment and personal growth in their professional role. It may reflect a desire for greater recognition of one's expertise, contributions, and value within the field of special education. It could involve advocating for changes that elevate the status of special education teachers, improve working conditions, or increase the level of support and resources available for students with disabilities.

#### *Focus Group Data Analysis Plan*

Focus groups brought forth differing perspectives by allowing group members to expand upon shared experiences, leading to a broader range of viewpoints compared to individual interviews. Consequently, the data obtained from focus groups exhibited a more comprehensive representation of opinions, beliefs, and contrasting experiences (Katz-Buonincontro, 2022). In total, two focus groups met via Microsoft Teams. Each meeting was recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams and Microsoft 365 software within Word. In contrast to interview transcriptions, focus group transcriptions highlighted the interplay of spoken expressions among multiple individuals.

Once the transcriptions of the focus groups were complete, the coding process outlined by Katz-Buonincontro (2022) was followed. This process was completed in the following order: differentiating manifest versus latent codes, capturing in vivo expressions and interactions, creating a codebook, using an iterative coding cycle, and developing categories or themes from

codes. Katz-Buonincontro described phenomenological research focus group data analysis as a four-stage process to explore the essence of lived experiences. Through in-depth interviews, stories of lived experience were generated using the following four stages: epoche, bracketing, reduction, and horizontalization. This involved self-examination, preparing oneself to embrace another person's experience, identifying meaningful themes, and adopting multiple viewpoints for a holistic understanding.

### **Data Synthesis**

Data synthesis and triangulation are crucial aspects of data analysis in various research approaches. Triangulation serves as a means to minimize biases, enhance the dependability and credibility of the research, and improve its overall reliability and validity (Natow, 2020). In the context of individual interviews using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a data analysis tool, data synthesis involves thoroughly examining and interpreting the rich narratives obtained from each participant. I identified patterns, themes, and connections across interviews to comprehensively understand the phenomenon under study. Triangulation in this approach involved comparing participants' perspectives and looking for similarities and differences to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings.

Journal prompts combined with thematic analysis as a data analysis tool entailed data synthesis, which entailed extracting relevant information and themes from the participants' written responses to the prompts. I carefully examined the journal entries, identified recurring ideas, and organized them into meaningful themes. The synthesis process involved systematically analyzing and summarizing the participants' written reflections to gain insights into their thoughts, experiences, and perspectives. Triangulation in this approach may have

involved comparing themes across different journal prompts or exploring variations in themes among participants.

Lastly, in focus groups with a coding process as a data analysis tool, data synthesis involved transcribing and systematically coding the discussions from the focus group sessions. I identified key topics, concepts, and opinions expressed by the participants. The coding process involved assigning labels or codes to specific data segments, allowing for the organization and categorization of the information. Data synthesis in this approach entailed aggregating and comparing coded data across different focus group sessions to identify common themes or divergent perspectives. Triangulation was achieved by examining the consistency or divergence of themes and codes within and across focus groups, enhancing the robustness of the findings.

In all these approaches, data synthesis and triangulation contributed to a comprehensive and nuanced analysis by integrating multiple data sources or perspectives. They strengthened the research findings' validity, reliability, and depth, providing a more holistic understanding of the studied phenomenon. This synthesis process could be intertwined with Maslow's theory of motivation, as the researcher may have explored how the identified themes align with Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the individuals' pursuit of self-actualization. Triangulation was achieved by combining these three data approaches through the convergence of findings, validation of patterns and themes, and the richness of data sources.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness addresses four foundational concepts: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Creswell and Poth (2016) explained that these four foundational concepts are similar to internal validation, external validation, reliability, and

objectivity and can be helpful to elements to establish credibility, such as prolonged engagement in the field and the triangulation of data sources, methods, and investigators.

### **Credibility**

Techniques for establishing credibility include prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and member-checking (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008). A comprehensive approach to data collection was conducted to establish credibility in this study. First and foremost, individual interviews were conducted with diverse participants, including current and former special education teachers from different locations. These interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of personal experiences, perspectives, and insights, thus providing valuable firsthand accounts. Additionally, focus groups were organized to foster discussions, encouraging participants to share their collective experiences and generate rich, multi-perspective data. Lastly, reflective journals were used as a complementary method, allowing teachers to document their thoughts, emotions, and reflections to share information they may not have shared in the individual interview or focus group. This approach ensured a robust and multifaceted examination of the research topic, enhancing the credibility of the findings by capturing the complexity and depth of the experiences and challenges faced by special education teachers in this specific context.

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to how research findings and conclusions can be applied to other groups or settings (Cope, 2014). Transferability is also known as generalizability and has much to do with similar situations (Finfgeld-Connett, 2010). Cope (2014) explained that transferability is established when the results of a study hold meaning for other individuals who were not involved in the study. Specifically, transferability occurs when readers can relate or associate



their experiences with those in a study's results. For research to be transferrable, there must be a level of abstraction that is potentially generalizable (Hellstrom, 2008). One way to establish transferability is to provide sufficient information. Deductions that have implications outside the immediate context of the study should be drawn (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Using many of the same samples can create bias and lower transferability. Transferability in this study was established by providing sufficient information for the reader and using a wide range of participants. Potential participants ranged from new special education teachers to veteran teachers, all of whom could have had different perspectives on the same topics.

### **Dependability**

Dependability refers to the consistency of data over varying conditions and time. Credibility entails the accurate identification and description of study participants, ensuring that the results maintain both credibility and truthfulness (Goodman et al., 2020). My study's clear and transparent research design enhanced its dependability. The data collection methods were reliable and consistent. Triangulation, incorporating multiple data sources, validated and strengthened my findings.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability in qualitative research pertains to the extent to which the researcher's influence affects the analysis process (Chung et al., 2020). Techniques for establishing confirmability include confirmability audits, audit trails, triangulation, and reflexivity. To ensure confirmability in my study, I employed the method of triangulation. Triangulation involves the integration of multiple sources of data to enhance the validity and credibility of the findings. In my research, I collected three types of data: individual interviews, reflective journals, and focus groups. By gathering data through various methods, I could examine the research problem from

multiple perspectives and comprehensively understand the complex factors contributing to attrition rates. The convergence of findings from different data sources provided a more robust and nuanced portrayal of the experiences and challenges faced by special education teachers in this context. Triangulation allowed for cross-validation, reducing the risk of bias or misinterpretation and increasing the overall reliability and confirmability of the research.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical issues could arise at any point in the research process. Proactively addressing potential ethical issues included obtaining the appropriate site permissions before conducting research or storing data in a secure location.

### ***Permissions***

Permission was obtained from the administration of the Facebook groups from which the participants were recruited (see Appendix D). The participants for this study were recruited from Facebook groups that cater to special education teachers. A total of five Facebook groups were contacted for potential participation. The contact was established through direct messages sent to the respective group administrators. Four of the five groups did not respond to the inquiry, while one group granted permission to post and recruit participants. I continued to reach out to different Facebook groups until I had recruited 10 participants. This group was specifically created for special education teachers who teach in the self-contained setting and boasted a membership of 41,800 individuals from various regions across the United States. The group operated as a private community, requiring new members to be added by the group administrator.

The recruitment process involved posting a message on the group feed outlining the study's purpose and details and specifying the eligibility requirements for participation. Once

permission was granted from the group administrator, an IRB application was sent for review and approval from the Liberty University Institutional Review Board. Once the LU IRB approved the application, the recruitment of participants began. Interested group members were contacted via direct message to obtain further contact information. Any relevant study documents were sent to participants via the email they provided.

### ***Other Participant Protections***

The biggest ethical concern in this study was the confidentiality of special education students and the nature of their disabilities. The types of disabilities included in a special education teacher's caseload could influence the stress that a person experiences. Therefore, it was important to discuss what types of disabilities were in each teacher's caseload. However, student identities stayed anonymous during all data collection. The confidentiality and privacy of the study's records were of utmost importance. All published reports were carefully crafted to ensure that no information was included that could potentially identify any of the participants. The research records were stored securely to maintain security, and only the designated researcher had access to them.

To further protect the confidentiality of the participants, their names were replaced with pseudonyms in all materials and documentation. Interviews were conducted in a private location to prevent any unintended eavesdropping or overhearing of the conversations. However, it must be noted that complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. Although discouraged, other focus group members could share the discussed information with individuals outside of the group. The data collected from the participants might have been utilized in future research studies or shared with other researchers. However, all identifiable information was carefully removed before any reuse or sharing occurred to ensure anonymity, if applicable. It was

stored on a password-locked computer or in a locked file cabinet to safeguard the data, ensuring limited access to authorized individuals only. After a period of three years, all electronic records were permanently deleted, and any hardcopy records were securely shredded to guarantee complete erasure of the data. Recordings of interviews were stored on a password-protected computer for a duration of three years, after which they were deleted. Only the researcher and members of her doctoral committee had access to these recordings, maintaining a restricted circle of individuals who could review or utilize them.

### **Summary**

The research design, research questions, setting and participants, imperative framework, philosophical assumptions, procedures, data collection plan, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations were reviewed in detail in chapter three. Data collection and analysis for the completed study happened in a methodological manner that gathered rich and descriptive data.

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand why special education teachers who worked with students with severe disabilities or EBD experienced elevated stress levels and burnout, resulting in high attrition and migration rates. By investigating this matter, the study had the potential to uncover the root causes behind the desire of special education teachers to leave the profession and propose effective measures to enhance attrition rates.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand why special education teachers who worked with students with severe disabilities or emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) experienced elevated stress levels and burnout, resulting in high attrition and migration rates. This study revealed commonalities in educators' discussions of their experiences, providing a holistic perspective on their collective experiences. The focus of this study is on special education teachers who specifically work with students with severe disabilities or EBD and the unique challenges they face that may contribute to high attrition rates. Ten participants were recruited from social media to share their experiences working with students with severe disabilities or EBD. This chapter includes details about the participants' demographic profiles, followed by Table 1, the results of the interviews, journal prompt responses, and focus group interviews. The results examine the data obtained from 10 participants' individual interviews, journal prompt responses, and focus group insights. The research questions and the significant themes that surfaced during this study are addressed.

### **Participants**

In this research study, 10 special education teachers from various places in the United States volunteered to share their experiences and perspectives with teaching students with severe disabilities and EBD. The participants were recruited from social media, specifically a Facebook group for special education teachers that teaches in a self-contained setting and is comprised of 41,000 professionals in the field of education. Eligibility criteria for inclusion in this research encompassed adaptive special education teachers presently teaching within segregated

educational environments across the United States. Furthermore, eligibility extended to educators who had transitioned from such roles within the past two years, irrespective of whether they had left the teaching profession entirely or migrated to alternative educational settings. Participants at both primary and secondary educational levels were welcomed into the study, provided they possessed firsthand experiences in instructing students confronted with severe disabilities or EBD. Active teachers were also required to hold a valid teaching certification corresponding to their current state of employment. The following table, denoted as Table 1, displays the demographic information of the special education teachers who took part in this research.

**Table 1**

*Teacher Participants*

Teacher Participant	Years Taught	Highest Degree Earned	Current Teaching Setting	Grade Level
Kasey	13	Bachelors	Self-Contained Middle School (moderate to severe)	6 <sup>th</sup> - 8 <sup>th</sup>
Ashley	3	Bachelors	Self-Contained High School (autism/EBD)	9 <sup>th</sup> - 12 <sup>th</sup>
Mary	18	Bachelors	Self-Contained Pre-School (autism/EBD)	PreK
Taylor	9	Education Specialist	Self-Contained Elementary (autism/EBD)	K - 5 <sup>th</sup>
Justin	11	Masters	Self-Contained High School (autism/EBD)	9 <sup>th</sup> - 12 <sup>th</sup>
Rhonda	11	Masters	Self-Contained Pre-School (autism/EBD)	PreK
Austin	15	Education Specialist	Self-Contained Middle School (moderate to severe)	6 <sup>th</sup> - 8 <sup>th</sup>
Emily	14	Bachelors	Self-Contained Middle School (moderate to severe)	6 <sup>th</sup> - 8 <sup>th</sup>

Sarah	12	Doctor of Philosophy	Self-Contained High School (autism/EBD)	9 <sup>th</sup> – 12 <sup>th</sup>
David	8	Masters	Self-Contained High School (autism/EBD)	9 <sup>th</sup> – 12 <sup>th</sup>

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### **Kasey**

Kasey is a middle school special education teacher with 13 years of experience. Her educational background is a bachelor's degree in early childhood and a minor in language arts. She originally wanted to teach kindergarten or first grade, but she became a stay-at-home mom after completing her degree. Once her children were school-aged, she got a job as a paraprofessional in a severe and profound self-contained special education classroom. After two years of working as a paraprofessional, Kasey obtained the certification to become an adaptive special education teacher. She has only worked in the self-contained setting throughout her career; therefore, she could not compare it to other teaching settings. Kasey currently has 13 students in her class with disabilities ranging from moderate to severe. Multiple students exhibit severe and maladaptive behaviors. Several students with autism exhibit challenging behaviors.

Kasey has excellent relationships with the families of her students. She typically has the same students in her class, ranging from three to five years, and builds close relationships with the students and their families over time. Much of her experience with professional development from the school is unrelated to what she teaches or her demographic of students. Due to staff shortages, Kasey does not have a defined planning period or duty-free lunch. She eats lunch with her students most days. The main paraprofessional who works with her has been in that position for over fifteen years, and they work well together. Other paraprofessionals have been hired to work in her classroom, but many have caused problems or disrupted the classroom dynamic. The administration at her school has changed multiple times in the past few years, which has caused

inconsistencies in procedures and processes at the school. Her primary sources of stress come from student behaviors, work overload, and having to complete job duties assigned to other staff members. While there is a significant amount of stress at times, Kasey plans to stay in the position she is in for several more years.

### **Ashley**

Ashley is a high school special education teacher with three years of experience. Her educational background is a bachelor's degree in creative writing and English. Growing up with a sibling with special needs, she was inspired to work with individuals with disabilities. She completed certifications to become qualified as a special education teacher in her state. Her first three years of teaching were in a private high school setting in a classroom with students grades nine through 12 who have autism and emotional behavioral disorders. In her most current teaching placement, Ashley had nine students in her class with disabilities ranging from autism to intellectual disabilities.

Ashley prefers working with students with behavioral challenges and finds joy when her students' progress, especially in communication. While some families were involved, many of the families that Ashley worked with were hands-off, or the students lived in a group home. Ashley does not have a planning period or duty-free lunch break. She eats lunch with her students and does her planning and paperwork at home. Ashley's job became significantly less enjoyable when she went from having two paraprofessionals to one. The level of support decreased and made the class almost unmanageable. Ashley's administration is young and inexperienced. They did not support the staff, which made Ashley feel disposable. Ashley did not receive any professional development geared toward the students she taught. Ashley's leading sources of stress came from student behaviors, lack of support from administration and



paraprofessionals, increased work overload, and unbalanced work-home life. Ashley will not be returning to that position and will start in a new position at a public high school in the next school year.

### **Mary**

Mary is a preschool special education teacher with 18 years of experience. Her educational background is a bachelor's degree in early childhood special education. She worked as a third-grade paraprofessional for her first three years in education and as a preschool special education teacher for the past fifteen years. Mary has two classes with a total of nine students. Both classes are in a self-contained setting, and all the students have been diagnosed with autism or are at risk of having autism.

Mary enjoys working with preschool-aged students who have been diagnosed with autism. She loves her job and current placement. Mary has close relationships with her students' families because they are dropped off and picked up each day so that she can interact with them daily. Mary has a designated time for lunch and planning. Each day, she has an hour between classes to eat lunch. Her planning is on Wednesday. Her students only come to school for four days, leaving her with one day that consists of seven hours for planning and professional development. The professional development that Mary receives does not pertain to the students she teaches. Mary has two paraprofessionals who work in the room with her. Her administration is very supportive, and she interacts with her students often. Overall, Mary feels supported at the school level but not at the district level. Her primary source of stress comes at the end of the year due to a lot of transition paperwork. Other sources of stress come from completing paperwork for non-certified special education teachers at the school and the additional work associated with that. Mary enjoys her current position and plans to remain there until she moves out of the state.

**Taylor**

Taylor is an elementary school special education teacher with 9 years of experience. Her educational background includes multiple degrees in the following order: an associate degree in general studies, a bachelor's degree in elementary and special education, a master's degree in teaching English to speakers of other languages, and an educational specialist degree in K12 leadership with graduate certificates in autism and leadership. Her current teaching position is in an elementary self-contained setting, serving seven kindergartens to fifth-grade students. The range of disabilities includes learning impaired to moderate and severe disabilities.

Taylor has worked in other settings, such as second through sixth grade, teaching students as the general education teacher and the primary in the ESL program. She has also had years where she functions as the department head and does not have a caseload of students. She finds a different set of challenges within different settings. In the adaptive setting, Taylor has experienced challenges in learning how to use the communication applications on the student devices. She has also been moved into a very small room, which has caused sensory issues with the students and increased her feelings of isolation. While Taylor provides all the academic instruction, her students go into inclusion as appropriate. The parents typically communicate with the general education teachers; therefore, her relationship with the parents of her students is not very close.

Each day, Taylor gets a 45-minute lunch and a 45-minute planning. Her classroom is allotted two full-time paraprofessionals and four more paraprofessionals who serve as one-on-one aids for more severe students. Taylor's administration changed twice during the past school year, which caused changes in her program. Those changes led to confusion, stress, and a lack of support. Other sources of stress derive from extra duties that take away from working with the

students and conflicts with parents regarding services. Taylor does not plan to leave her position but willingly moves to any position that she is needed in.

### **Justin**

Justin is a high school special education teacher with 11 years of experience. His career in education began with a foundation in the sciences, as he earned a bachelor's degree in science and sports management. His passion for working with students with special needs led him to pursue further education. He pursued a master's degree in special education to equip himself with the specialized knowledge and skills needed to address the unique challenges faced by individuals with disabilities. In his current role, Justin serves as a special education teacher in a self-contained high school setting, working closely with four students with autism and intellectual disabilities.

Justin loves his current position and feels he works in a great district. He has worked in other districts and classroom settings. His current placement is in a much more affluent district, and he receives abundant support and resources. Justin has excellent relationships with the students' families and interacts with them daily. His lunch break and planning vary from day to day. Due to the students' behaviors, Justin usually cannot leave the room and does not get a duty-free lunch break or planning. On good days, he can leave the room for lunch and planning. The professional development that the school facilitates does not pertain to the demographic of students that Justin teaches and is not helpful for him. He receives full support from his administration. There have been conflicts with paraprofessionals within his classroom pertaining to unprofessional behavior, which was a source of stress. Other sources of stress revolved around student behaviors. Justin loves his current position but plans to move into an administrative position. This would allow him to implement needed changes and increase his pay.

**Rhonda**

Rhonda is an elementary school special education teacher with 11 years of experience. Rhonda has a bachelor's degree in early childhood education. Soon after graduating with her bachelor's degree, she obtained a job as a paraprofessional with students who have severe needs. This role inspired Rhonda to obtain her teaching certification for special education. She pursued a master's degree in special education and has teaching endorsements in English as a second language, reading, PreK with disabilities, and autism. Currently, Rhonda is in a role as an elementary school special education teacher within a self-contained setting, where she serves 13 students with autism.

Rhonda loves her current placement and has close relationships with her students' families. Each day, Rhonda has a 25-minute duty-free lunch and a 45-minute planning. Professional development offered by the school does not pertain to Rhonda's students, so she seeks professional development on her own. Rhonda receives an abundance of support from both her paraprofessionals and her administration. Most of Rhonda's stress derives from the curriculum enforced for her students. She must use the general education standards, but her students function at several grade levels below their age. Overall, Rhonda is happy with her placement and has plans to stay in that current position for years to come.

**Austin**

Austin is a middle school special education teacher with 15 years of experience. His educational background is a bachelor's degree in broadcast journalism, a master's degree in special education, and an educational specialist degree in special education. His passion for communication and storytelling informs his teaching style, allowing him to engage students creatively and effectively. Recognizing the importance of specialized knowledge, Austin pursued

a master's degree and an educational specialist degree in special education. His current teaching position is in a middle school self-contained setting serving students with autism and intellectual disabilities. He currently has nine students who have severe needs and behavioral challenges.

Austin has fair relationships with the families of his students. He interacts with most of them multiple times a week. Due to a staff shortage and student behaviors, Austin does not have a duty-free lunch break or planning period. He eats lunch with his students and plans at home. He does attend professional development sessions, but they do not typically pertain to his students or their needs. The administration has changed multiple times over the past few years, leaving Austin unsupported. He is also short one paraprofessional in his classroom. Austin's primary source of stress is the student behavior and lack of support. Austin would like to move into an administrative position within the next couple of years. He would like to implement changes that would benefit the students and the teachers.

### **Emily**

Emily is a middle school special education teacher with 14 years of experience. She has a bachelor's degree in early childhood education and a minor in psychology. Emily's journey in special education began when she accepted a position as a paraprofessional in a challenging, severe, and profound self-contained special education classroom. During her first year as a paraprofessional, Emily gained valuable insights into the world of special education. She developed a deep commitment to helping students with diverse abilities, which led her to pursue certification as an adaptive special education teacher. Throughout her career, Emily has primarily worked in the self-contained special education setting. Currently, Emily serves as a special education teacher in a middle school with a class of nine students. Her students have a wide range of disabilities, including severe to moderate, and several exhibit severe and disruptive

behaviors.

Emily enjoys working with middle school-aged students and has excellent relationships with them and their families. She typically teaches the same students for four to five years. The professional development offered to Emily through her school does not usually pertain to her students. She currently has two paraprofessionals who work in the room with her. She can leave the room for a duty-free lunch break, but there is no teachers' lounge, so she eats lunch with her students most days. She leaves the room and plans in the library when she wants to take a planning period. Her students do not usually leave the room to go to other classes during the day. Emily's administration is supportive, but some decisions about her program are out of their control. Her primary sources of stress result from increased paperwork and student behavior. Emily plans to stay in the same position for the next few years.

### **Sarah**

Sarah is a high school special education teacher. She has a bachelor's degree in psychology, a master's degree in special education, and a doctoral degree in educational psychology. Sarah has been dedicated to her teaching career for 12 years and specializes in working with students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Currently, Sarah teaches at a high school, where she works in a specialized program for students with emotional and behavioral disorders in a separate setting away from the general education classes. Her classroom consists of 12 students who face various emotional regulation and behavior challenges.

Sarah works closely with a few of the students' families. Communication between Sarah and the student families happens weekly, but she stated that most parents can be very hard to contact. For example, they are not returned when sending home forms, and their phone numbers change often. Schoolwide professional developments are generally of no use to Sarah or her

students. She does watch webinars and other training videos for professional development. Sarah can take a lunch break away from her students, but most days, she eats with her students inside the classroom and does her planning at home. She currently has two paraprofessionals who work in the room with her. Her administration is supportive but hands-off. Her primary source of stress comes from student behavior and a lack of resources. The administration also sometimes pulls one of her paraprofessionals to cover other positions in the school. Sarah would like to change positions within the next few years. She would like a position that includes more administrative duties without having a caseload.

### **David**

David is a high school special education teacher with a bachelor's in biology and physical education. He has been teaching for eight years. His true calling emerged when he discovered his passion for working with students with special needs. Driven by this passion, David pursued further education and achieved a master's degree in special education. In his current role, David serves as a teacher in a high school self-contained setting. He works closely with six students who have autism and intellectual disabilities, providing them with the support they need to thrive academically and socially.

David has inconsistent relationships with his students' families. They are difficult to get in touch with at times. Currently, David has two paraprofessionals who work with him. Some years there have been less. He is able to take a 45-minute duty-free lunch and a 45-minute planning period. David is involved in planning community-based vocation instruction and transition planning for his students. David's administration is supportive of him and interacts with his students daily. His primary source of stress comes from disruptive student behaviors and excess paperwork. David wants to move into an administrative position in the next few years.

## Results

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand why special education teachers who worked with students with severe disabilities or EBD experienced elevated stress levels and burnout, resulting in high attrition and migration rates. Upon receiving approval from the IRB to proceed with the study, I spent six weeks recruiting participants. I gathered data for five weeks. To ensure the validity of the findings, I employed triangulation by consulting three different sources: individual interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups. All three data analyses of the individual interviews, journal prompt responses, and focus groups. The individual and focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed using software within Microsoft Teams. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to find themes within the transcriptions of the individual interviews. A thematic analysis approach was used to analyze the written journal prompt responses. The focus group interviews were analyzed using a coding process. From the data, six major themes, 17 subthemes, and 26 codes emerged, as shown in Table 2.

The first set of data that was analyzed was the individual interviews. The interviews were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative research method used to explore and understand individuals' lived experiences and perspectives that involves a systematic and interpretative process to develop themes from interview transcripts. After completing the interviews, I read through the transcriptions multiple times to become familiar with the content and gain an initial understanding of the participants' experiences. During the initial coding, I identified meaningful units of text that captured the essence of what participants were saying. I then grouped related units of text into clusters that represented emerging themes.



The themes were interpreted by exploring their significance and meaning within the context of the research questions. Six themes and 14 subthemes emerged from this data analysis.

After the individual interviews were analyzed, the journal prompt responses were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. I began the thematic analysis by reading the journal prompt responses multiple times to become familiar with the data. I then coded the data by identifying and labeling meaningful segments, phrases, and sentences in the responses that captured the essence of what was being expressed in the text. The coded data aligned with the themes identified in the analysis of the individual interviews. Three additional subthemes emerged from the journal's data analysis prompt responses, including depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and emotional isolation.

Lastly, the focus group interviews were analyzed using a coding process. After completing both focus group sessions, each transcription was reviewed multiple times to ensure comprehensive understanding. Next, data coding was performed, identifying and categorizing pertinent segments, phrases, and sentences reflective of the communicated content. The coded data were then correlated with previously identified thematic elements from the analysis of individual interviews. Thematic comparisons were conducted across the focus groups to establish congruencies and disparities. No divergent perspectives or novel insights were observed throughout this comparative process among distinct focus group cohorts. The data analysis revealed no emergence of novel themes or subthemes.

**Table 2**

*Themes & Subthemes*

Theme	Subthemes	Codes
Support	Administration Paraprofessionals	Experience Staff shortage

	Relationships with families Financial	Lack of training Parent support Lack of funding Lack of resources
Feelings of Isolation	Emotional isolation Physical isolation	Inclusion Forgotten Disrespect Lack of communication Community
Burnout	Stress Depersonalization Emotional exhaustion Reduced personal accomplishment	Student behaviors Paperwork Overworked
Professional Development	College preparation On-site professional learning	Skills Knowledge Preparation Advancement Endorsements Certifications
Successful Practices	Evidence based practices Student progress	Consistency Communication

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## Support

Support was the most overwhelming theme that was derived from the data. Support can be seen in multiple forms, including administrative support, paraprofessional support, within the relationships between the teacher and the parents or guardians, and financial support. Levels of support can vary depending on the people, district, and location. When asked about support, Justin replied in the interview,

I'm in a great district. I feel very supported by my colleagues, my supervisor, the department, and the school itself. I taught in a similar role in an urban district beforehand, and I felt like I wasn't supported there. The suburban district offers more resources, support, and training.

### ***Administration***

Administrative support encompasses a broad range of components, such as extended mentorship, enhanced educational prospects, expanded planning duration, teacher involvement in school-wide decision-making, amplified teacher cooperation, substantive engagements between school leadership and educators, as well as moral, emotional, or instructional assistance (Ford et al., 2019). Of the 10 participants, three felt fully supported by their administration. Rhonda stated in the interview, "My administration is amazing! They are always willing to listen to my concerns and encourage me to bring my students to them to show off accomplishments!" Mary expressed in the interview, "She loves little kids, she's really good and really supportive, and goes to bat for us."

The participants who did not feel supported by the administration expressed concerns regarding their inexperience, lack of effort, lack of knowledge about special education, a constant change of administration, disorganization, and their concerns not being heard. Kasey shared in the focus group, "I don't feel like in the recent years that we've had a whole lot of effort at all from our administration for the students. It feels like our needs are at the bottom of the totem pole." Ashley said in the interview,

They were pretty hands off, and they were nice people. I liked them, but as far as like helping in the classroom, not very helpful. I would say that I felt satisfied with my job and that I liked what I did every day, but I did not feel supported by the administration.

Multiple participants felt that the administration limited their daily practices. Two participants had administrators resign in the middle of the school year, resulting in policy changes. Overall, the participants who did not feel supported by their administration felt that the administrators did not understand their students or their needs well.

### *Paraprofessionals*

A shortage of paraprofessionals in a special education classroom can have significant and multifaceted impacts on students and teachers. Some of the impacts include a reduction in individualized support, an increased workload for the special education teacher, limited behavior management, response times to students' immediate needs may be delayed, reduced inclusion opportunities for students, and increased teacher stress (T. L. Fisher et al., 2022). Of the 10 participants, only three had fully staffed classrooms. The other seven were experiencing a shortage of one or more paraprofessionals. When discussing the staff shortage Ashley stated in the interview, "I would say a big reason my job changed, and I didn't enjoy it as much as when I dropped from two paraprofessionals to one." This made her student-to-teacher ratio increase and more challenging. The students did not receive the same level of support, and the challenging behaviors were harder to manage.

Scheduling lunch breaks and a planning period were also impacted when only one paraprofessional was in the classroom. In many situations, it was not safe to leave one staff member alone with students who have challenging or aggressive behaviors (Barnes et al., 2021). Three participants did not receive a duty-free lunch break or planning for this reason. Three other participants had the opportunity to have a duty-free lunch break but ate lunch with their students most of the time. This was due to the liability of students acting out while the teacher was out of the room and limited teacher-only spaces in the school to eat lunch. Having adequate support in

the classroom and from the administration can make a tremendous difference in job satisfaction. David stated during the interview, “Sufficient staffing and having a strong behavior program is the key to success.” Rhonda wrote, “Because of the severity of the disabilities and needs of my students, fewer students and more adults would be preferred. The ratio of students to adults is too high.”

An additional concern regarding paraprofessional support revolves around insufficient training and their handling of unprofessional behavior. Justin shared in the interview,

There have been issues with discipline, such as showing up late, constantly on their phones, or ignoring my instructions. When they receive a consequence, they quit because there is already a lack of pay, and they just get another job somewhere else. Then we end up without a replacement and short-staffed.

Ashley has also had problems with unprofessional behaviors from paraprofessionals and stated in the interview, “In one instance, a newly hired paraprofessional refused to push a student in a wheelchair. Sometimes it's better to be short-staffed than have a paraprofessional who brings down the vibe of the classroom.” The participants who have encountered problems with the support they receive all agree that unprofessional behaviors exhibited by paraprofessionals, including tardiness and excessive cell phone usage, significantly disrupt the classroom environment. Such conduct not only undermines the learning atmosphere but also detracts from the quality of support and supervision that students with diverse needs require.

### ***Relationships with Families***

The relationship between special education teachers and students' families is essential for several reasons, including making informed decisions about the student's education, ensuring that the strategies and approaches used in the classroom are aligned with those implemented at home,

and allowing both parties to gain valuable insights into the student's strengths, challenges, preferences, and individualized learning goals. This partnership is crucial in ensuring the overall success and well-being of students with special needs. The participants' responses about the support they receive from students' families were split fifty-fifty. Five participants said they had very good relationships with their students' families, and the other five had challenges with their relationships with their students' families.

Of the five participants who had good relationships with their students' families, three taught in elementary and two in middle school. Participants who taught high school-aged students did not appear to have as supportive and close relationships with their students' families. Ashley said during the interview, "When I worked with students that had emotional disturbance and behavior disorders, the parents were somewhat involved. Some kids were in a group home and did not always have good representation." Mary explained to the focus group, "I have close relationships with my students' families. All their parents transport them, so I see them at drop-off and pick-up. I get to talk to them about their child's day at these times."

### ***Financial***

Financial support for teachers in a self-contained classroom is crucial for many reasons, as it directly impacts the quality of education and the well-being of teachers and students. All the participants expressed concerns regarding financial-related matters. The concerns surrounded the low pay and buying resources out of their pocket. Six of the participants had completed advanced degrees, which gave them a pay increase. David stated during the interview, "The starting pay when I started teaching was not enough to live on. I decided to go back to school for my master's degree to become more knowledgeable about special education and to increase my pay." Six participants expressed negative feelings about having a low salary but being expected to stay late

and perform other after-hours duties. The participants also discussed the resources they bought at their own expense because the school cannot provide them or a budget for spending. Sarah stated in the interview,

Many of my students have sensory needs. I purchased things such as fidgets and weighted blankets after finding out that there was not going to be money in the budget at school for my classroom. It adds up, but the things I purchased really make a difference.

The need for a pay increase was brought up by four of the participants. Providing educators with higher pay could attract and retain more teachers, boost morale, function as motivation, and provide economic stability. Five participants had already obtained an advanced degree, increasing their salary. Three others were working on an advanced degree. This also makes the opportunity for advancement an option. Emily stated in the interview, “Better pay is needed. When I first started in this field, I was living paycheck to paycheck. It is a little better now, but most of my extra money gets spent on classroom supplies.”

### **Feelings of Isolation**

The feeling of isolation can significantly impact a special education teacher working in a self-contained setting. Special education teachers in self-contained classrooms typically work with a small group of students with diverse and often complex learning needs. Some of the effects may include limited peer support leading to feelings of professional loneliness, teachers struggling to manage their own emotions and stress, challenges with coordinating and collaborating with other professionals, increased workload, limited resource sharing, and limited access to workshops, conferences, and training opportunities, hindering their ability to grow as educators and provide the best possible instruction to their students. David stated in the interview, “I feel like I’m on an island. I’ve found it to be more difficult here than any place I’ve

been before.” Isolation can be categorized into emotional isolation and physical isolation. All of the participants felt a sense of isolation.

### ***Emotional Isolation***

Emotional isolation refers to the experience of feeling socially and emotionally disconnected from others within the educational setting or the broader teaching community (K. C. Herman et al., 2023). It involves a sense of loneliness, disconnection, and a lack of emotional support from colleagues, administrators, and peers. This isolation can be particularly pronounced for special education teachers due to the unique challenges they face in their roles (Bettini et al., 2022). Emily explained in her journal response that the emotional toll of witnessing her students' struggles, advocating for their needs, and managing complex classroom dynamics can be overwhelming. Without other colleagues to empathize with her, she became emotionally isolated. Sarah shared in the interview, “Most other teachers do not understand my students, and don't take the time to get to know them. I mainly interact with the other special education teachers.” Kasey shared in the focus group, “The general education teachers make comments about the small class size in a degrading way, not realizing how much help my students really need. It makes me feel less than.”

### ***Physical Isolation***

Physical isolation refers to the condition in which a special education teacher works in a physically separate or segregated setting from other parts of the school or teaching community. Physical isolation can be when the special education class is in an isolated classroom, a separate hallway or wing, or a resource room away from the general population. Physical isolation may result in limited access to the common areas, reduced visibility and interaction with the broader school community, disparities in access to materials, technology, and support services compared



to general education classrooms, and can hinder the integration and socialization of students with disabilities in the inclusion setting. Ashley stated in the interview, “My students are not included in everything and are excluded from some events. Some events are not appropriate for my students, and there aren't alternative plans made, which isn't fair.” Taylor explained in the interview, “Last year, the administration decided to move me out of an appropriate environment. Now, we don't have access to things like a sensory room or laundry facility, and our kitchen is half the size. We lost about 700 square feet in floor space.” She added, “I feel like we are the most severe special education population in the entire school of 13,150 kids. There's only nine of us. I feel like they don't understand these kids, and I'm constantly having to advocate and fight for them in a position where I shouldn't. This is a protected population.”

### **Burnout**

Burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion resulting from prolonged and excessive stress, particularly in demanding work or caregiving responsibilities (Buonomo et al., 2022). It is characterized by symptoms and feelings that can impact a person's overall well-being and functioning (Bartram et al., 2023). The three characteristics that make up burnout syndrome are depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Stress and burnout are highly individualized (Eddy et al., 2019). What one person perceives as stress may not be stressful to someone else. The participants had many different sources of stress, some universal and others unique. The years of experience correlated with stress and burnout in some cases. Three of the participants expressed more stress during their first year of teaching. Mary expressed in the journal prompt, “My first year as a certified teacher was really hard because I did not understand all the paperwork and stuff I had to do.”

Throughout their careers, half of the participants considered leaving the profession, moving to a different school or district, or switching to a different content area, such as becoming a general education math teacher. Of the 10, three participants had moved districts within the past 2 years. Three participants are working on advanced degrees intending to move into an administrative position within the next five years. When asked what possible improvements would make their job better and more likely to stay, the participants responded primarily about professional development, increased support, and a pay increase. Ashley responded to the journal prompt, “I think team building, having a good teacher culture, and having a planning period or lunch break would help retain teachers. I think people take us for granted.”

### *Stress*

Stress for special education teachers can be influenced by both perception and experience. Special education teachers work with students who have a wide range of disabilities and diverse needs, making their jobs particularly challenging. During the focus group, Kasey explained, “Every student had unique needs, were short staffed, there is an overload of redundant paperwork, and I do not even get a planning. Stress is an understatement.” Stress in this profession can be influenced by the individual’s perception of the role and success, personal resilience, training, support system, workload, resources, student behavior, student progress, administrative support, emotional investment, and expertise (Eddy et al., 2019). All ten participants experienced stress while working with students who had severe disabilities or EBD. Emily said during the interview, “The school environment is tense. There are high expectations from administration, and I feel like they do not understand my kids.” Several situations stressed the participants, including working beyond contracted hours, no lunch break or planning,

workload, low pay, student behaviors, lack of support, paperwork, and increased duties. Of the 10 participants, seven of them did not have a duty-free lunch or defined planning period. They ate lunch with their students. The students did not leave the room throughout the day due to extreme behaviors or lack of support; therefore, the teacher could not take a true planning period. Mary explained in the interview, “There was no planning, and there was no lunch break, so we ate lunch with the kids, and I did my planning at home.”

Higher levels of stress were reported by the participants regarding teaching students with severe disabilities or EBD during and after the pandemic. Three of the participants reported struggles with virtually teaching students with severe disabilities over video calls because they had a hard time engaging and needed physical assistance from a caregiver to participate. Emily wrote, “During virtual learning, it felt like more of a lesson for the parents than the students because their parents had to do all the work.” Emily explained that these feelings started to create stress for her because the parents had to take time out of their workday to do hand-over-hand with their child during the virtual lessons, and not much progress was being made. Four of the participants expressed stress after they returned from virtual learning. Taylor explained in a focus group, “Forcing them to wear masks all day was out of their comfort zone and ability. It was a constant fight. It was exhausting.” Justin wrote, “Learning was interrupted. There is this huge gap, and I feel like students have not recovered from that. These students need consistency, which did not happen while we were out for virtual learning.” Mary explained in an interview, “We do not do much academic work. There are a lot of behavioral issues because the students were out of school for so long.”

### ***Depersonalization***

Depersonalization is described as harboring a pessimistic and unfavorable outlook toward

students (Fu et al., 2021). This phenomenon is often classified as a coping mechanism, and it can manifest in individuals with burnout. Educators struggling with depersonalization tend to exhibit negative interactions, evident through their unfavorable attitudes and interactions with students, parents, and colleagues (Benita et al., 2019). Critical indicators of depersonalization include cognitive detachment and a pessimistic mindset. Educators displaying depersonalization may inadvertently overlook their students' unique and engaging qualities, distancing themselves from meaningful connections and treating others as objects (Puertas et al., 2019). Most of the participants did not show signs of depersonalization. Mary shared in her journal response, “There have been a few students over the years that are difficult to bond with.” David shared during the interview,

At my previous school there were some days I didn't have the energy to deal with the kids. I didn't even care if they made progress or not. It's not like it was going to make a difference. I didn't have the support from the administration or their parents. It was a tough situation.

### ***Emotional Exhaustion***

Emotional exhaustion is often characterized as a state of depletion in one's emotional reserves, leading to an incapacity to engage with situations on a psychological level (Puertas et al., 2019). Educators dealing with highly disruptive students are at a heightened risk of experiencing emotional exhaustion, primarily due to feelings of reduced self-efficacy in their teaching abilities (Park & Shin, 2020). Emotional exhaustion can also manifest in teachers who invest more emotionally than they receive in return (Park & Shin, 2020). Each participant had felt emotionally exhausted at some point during their career. Ashley shared with the focus group, “Towards the end of my time with the emotionally disturbed behavior disorder kids, I thought, it

was kind of like I didn't know who I was anymore. I just felt so exhausted I couldn't do anything after work.”

### ***Reduced Personal Accomplishment***

Reduced personal achievement can lead to individuals harboring adverse sentiments regarding their skills, accomplishments, and triumphs (Puertas et al., 2019). Educators prioritizing nurturing strong student-teacher connections may encounter diminished personal fulfillment when dealing with students facing challenges forming close bonds with peers (Park & Shin, 2020). Special education teachers engaging with students with severe disabilities or EBD are often observed to have fewer fulfilling relationships with these students compared to their interactions with others. Four teachers felt a sense of reduced personal accomplishment at some point in their careers. Mary explained in the interview,

During virtual learning, it was a little bit more stressful just because you couldn't interact with the children, and you had to have them on the screen. And because my students have so many needs, they were able to interact. They didn't really learn anything. It was like having a screen on in the background.

### **Professional Development**

Professional development for a teacher is the ongoing process of acquiring and enhancing the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary to educate and support students with disabilities or special needs effectively (Bergmark, 2023). Special education teachers work with a diverse group of students who may have a wide range of disabilities, so continuous learning and growth are crucial to meet the unique needs of each student. In most cases, the participants received no professional development that applied to the students they served. Most professional development was aimed at the general education teachers teaching core content. Kasey wrote,

“There is no professional development provided for adaptive special education teachers. Most professional development is geared towards general ed teachers.” Many participants sought professional development privately by continuing their education, and some were given professional development at their work site. Of the ten participants, only one received professional development on-site that applied to her students.

Professional development was mentioned the most as a way to increase teacher retention and teacher satisfaction. Nine participants felt that the current professional development did not apply to them. All the participants had at least one problem or student behavior they did not feel adequately trained and prepared to handle. Emily wrote, “I would like more professional development on behavior management strategies and how sensory needs impact behavior.” During the focus group, Taylor stated, “I think that more direct professional development on my students, actual disabilities instead of generalized, would be more helpful.” Austin shared in the interview, “We need professional development that’s about the best instructional practices for working with severe population. I felt like I wasn't really trained properly for this when I was in my master’s program.”

### ***College Preparation***

College preparation and continuing education are crucial to a teacher's professional development. They ensure that educators are well-equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to excel in their roles, stay updated on educational trends, and meet the diverse needs of their students (Dempsey & Mestry, 2023). Many teachers enhance their skills through professional development by continuing their education and obtaining advanced degrees, endorsements, and certifications. Five of the participants already had advanced degrees in education. Three of the participants were currently in school continuing their education. Rhonda

stated in the interview, “Taking the 240 hours of classes for my Autism endorsement really increased my understanding of working with students with autism. I also attend webinars with FSU’s Center for Autism and Related Disabilities.”

### ***On-Site Professional Learning***

On-site professional learning for special education teachers is essential to their ongoing growth and effectiveness in supporting students with special needs (Woulfin & Jones, 2021). This type of professional development occurs within the school or educational institution where teachers work, and it is designed to enhance their skills, knowledge, and abilities in catering to the diverse needs of students with disabilities. On-site professional learning for special education teachers might entail differentiation, collaborative learning, teaching strategies, legal and ethical considerations, assistive technology, cultural competence, and progress monitoring. One of the ten participants stated that she received on-site professional learning that applied to her students. Taylor stated in the interview,

Every quarter, the self-contained teachers specifically get 2 days of professional learning, and they will provide one day trainings for things like the unique learning system. In general, we get eight training days a year for the alternate curriculum, alternate assessment, and standards.

The other nine participants did not recall any professional learning or development sessions related to their teaching placement. During the interview, David shared, “I feel like professional learning is commercially geared towards a general population. For example, like standardized tests, we do an alternative portfolio, and I received absolutely zero training on that.” Mary stated during her interview, “There hasn't been a lot of professional development at my school that apply to the type of children that I teach.”

## **Successful Practices**

Self-contained and inclusion special education teachers share many common practices as they work with students with diverse learning needs and disabilities. However, there are some differences in their approaches due to the unique context and responsibilities associated with self-contained classrooms. Self-contained special education teachers often work much closer with their students and their families (Coleman et al., 2023). Communication deficits are a common characteristic of students with severe disabilities and EBD; therefore, these teachers must find alternate ways of communication for their students. These students also commonly need specific behavior management strategies and intense individualized instruction. The successes these students experience may look very different compared to their non-disabled peers. Ashley stated in her interview, “You can really see someone's communication improving in real time with autism, and that's really cool to witness!”

## ***Evidence-Based Practices***

Evidence-based practices in self-contained special education classrooms involve using instructional and behavioral strategies that have been rigorously researched and proven effective through scientific studies (Atas et al., 2023). These practices are designed to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities in a self-contained setting. Components of evidence-based practices can be centered around the individual educational plan, communication, the environment, visual supports, behavior management, progress monitoring, instructional strategies, and assistive technology. Mary stated in her interview,

My successful practices are usually sensory-based. I had one student that would bang on furniture and push it over and sometimes push furniture over onto other kids. But because his sensory needs were so high, I went through a lot of different tools with him. I did



figure out that using a body sock really helped him control his body.

Taylor stated in her interview, “I introduced the task box and more of a center rotation-based classroom. With that schedule setup and keeping it consistent, it helped me potty train two students.”

### ***Student Progress***

Student progress in the self-contained special education setting is much different from that in the inclusion setting (Zagona et al., 2022). Students with severe disabilities and EBD often work on more than academic skills. Student progress for these students will likely include functional skills, daily living skills, and behavior management. Their progress can also be much smaller and slower than their non-disabled peers. Emily shared during the interview, “There is growth every year that I see, including academic, social, and adaptive skills. Even learning how to eat with a fork or using the bathroom, those things are so huge for me.” Rhonda stated in the interview, “My students make the most progress when I am working one-on-one with them, which is difficult. Including lots of movement, breaks and flexible seating helps.”

### **Research Question Responses**

The study gathered data to address a primary research question and three subsidiary research inquiries. This data encompassed responses to twelve interview questions, responses to a journal prompt, and the outcomes of two focus group discussions centered on five specific questions. Within this section, concise responses to the research questions are presented.

#### **Central Research Question**

What are the leading causes of attrition and migration among teachers who teach students with severe disabilities or EBD in separate settings outside of the general education population?

According to this study, the leading causes of attrition and migration among teachers who teach students with severe disabilities or EBD in separate settings outside of the general education population encompass a range of challenges. These include inadequate support from various sources, such as administration, paraprofessionals, and families, leading to frustration and burnout. Administrative support plays a pivotal role, with job dissatisfaction stemming from administrative turnover, a lack of understanding of special education, and policy changes. Paraprofessional shortages exacerbate the situation, increasing teacher workload and stress, compounded by insufficient training and unprofessional behavior. Additionally, relationships with students' families can have mixed impacts on teacher satisfaction, with positive connections enhancing the educational experience and challenging relationships contributing to stress. Inadequate financial support also plagues these teachers, leading to dissatisfaction Taylor expressed in her journal response,

Support from administration is non-existent. They seem to focus on the majority of the student population which never includes special education. Special education should have their own budget and administration to ensure this specialized population gets what they need, when they need it.

Burnout, driven by the demanding nature of their roles, compounds stressors related to workload, low pay, student behavior, and a lack of support or administrative issues. Feelings of emotional and physical isolation hinder collaboration and exacerbate these challenges. David wrote in his journal response, "The lack of tailored professional development and limited access to relevant coursework for college preparation further contribute to dissatisfaction, affecting their ability to meet the unique needs of their students. Rhonda expressed in the focus group, "I take courses outside of work because the professional development sessions at school are never

relevant for my students.” Inadequate progress measurement in self-contained settings and the struggle to find effective practices compound these issues. Kasey expressed in her journal response, “With some students, progress can take years to see. I have to remind myself that my students are at an unequal advantage. I wish I could help them more.” However, teachers suggest that addressing these challenges through improved support, tailored professional development, competitive compensation, and a supportive work environment can help mitigate attrition and migration among teachers in self-contained special education settings.

### **Sub-Question One**

What are the primary causes of stress and burnout for special education teachers who teach students with severe disabilities or EBD in separate settings?

The primary causes of stress and burnout for special education teachers who teach students with severe disabilities or EBD in separate settings include heavy workloads, paperwork, long working hours, lack of support, challenging student behaviors, pressure to meet academic standards, low pay, lack of planning time, lack of duty-free lunch breaks, and student progress concerns. The participants mentioned that they often have significant paperwork to complete, including Individualized Education Programs (IEP), progress reports, and other administrative tasks. This paperwork can be time-consuming and contribute to their stress. Most participants reported working beyond their contracted hours, arriving early, and leaving late. This extra time spent on work can lead to burnout and exhaustion. During her interview, Sarah recalled, “It's usually me sitting on the couch writing IEPs or contacting parents after hours, having meetings after hours. There's a lot of extra work.”

Seven participants mentioned within the interview, journal response, or focus group the feeling of being overwhelmed by the needs of their students and the lack of support from

paraprofessionals and administrative staff. Emily stated in her journal response, “I am exhausted by the aggressive behaviors of the students, and the administration isn’t helping.” This lack of support can make their job more challenging and stressful. Issues related to administrative decisions, such as caseload management and lack of clarity on differentiation strategies, were mentioned as sources of stress. Ashley stated in the focus group, “The administration doesn’t consider the dynamics of my classroom when placing students. I have multiple students with extreme behaviors.” Dealing with students with severe disabilities or EBD often involves managing challenging behaviors. This can be emotionally taxing and contribute to burnout, especially when students’ behaviors are disruptive or aggressive. Two participants also mentioned the pressure to align their instruction with grade-level standards, even when their students are significantly below that level. Rhonda explained in the interview, “My students must be taught in the general education setting until third grade per the district. This can be an inappropriate and difficult placement for them.” Austin stated in his interview,

I had a student who was quadriplegic, nonverbal, and severely cognitively disabled. For the state assessment, I had to teach her things like the countries in Africa. What sense does that make? We should be focusing on things that will give her a better quality of life, not the state academic standards. There needs to be a change and a different set of standards for some students.

This can lead to feelings of frustration and reduced personal accomplishment. Two teachers expressed dissatisfaction with their salaries, which can add financial stress to their lives and potentially contribute to burnout. Seven of the participants reported not having dedicated planning time or lunch breaks, which can lead to feelings of exhaustion and inadequate time to prepare for their classes. Some participants felt frustrated when they perceived that their students

were not making sufficient academic progress, which could impact their sense of personal accomplishment. The pandemic disrupted teaching and learning, leading to additional stress and challenges, including in-person and remote learning transitions. It is important to note that these causes of stress and burnout are interconnected and can vary from one teacher to another.

### **Sub-Question Two**

What factors about teaching students with severe disabilities or EBD in separate settings play a role in why teachers remain in or leave their positions?

Retaining special education teachers in positions involving students with severe disabilities or EBD in separate settings requires addressing support, administrative support, paraprofessional support, family relationships, financial support, burnout, stress, isolation, professional development, pay, and the implementation of successful and evidence-based practices. All the participants expressed a strong commitment to their students and their personal growth, and they found satisfaction in witnessing the progress of students with severe disabilities or EBD. Collaborative support, emotional connections, and positive relationships with students and their families play a significant role in their decision to remain in their positions. Building strong relationships with students is crucial. The participants emphasized the importance of unconditional positive regard for their students, especially when dealing with challenging behaviors. Developing positive relationships fosters trust and helps in managing student behaviors effectively. The joy and fulfillment the participants experience when connecting with students emotionally is a significant factor for them remaining in their current positions. Mary stated in her interview, “Interacting with the children is where I find joy at my job. The relationships with the kids and their families are amazing.” Students with severe disabilities may

have communication challenges, but it is particularly rewarding for teachers when progress is made.

### **Sub-Question Three**

What interventions, strategies, and teacher support can help remedy high attrition rates for special education teachers working with students with severe disabilities or EBD?

To address the high attrition rates among special education teachers working with students with severe disabilities or EBD, a comprehensive set of interventions, strategies, and teacher support measures can be implemented. First, tailored professional development programs should cover behavior management strategies, sensory needs, and specific disabilities. Ongoing training in evidence-based practices for self-contained settings and training for paraprofessionals are crucial (Max & McCoy-Dailey, 2024). This includes offering paraprofessional training to ensure they are well-prepared and professional. Taylor stated in her interview, “I’ve taken a whole bunch of autism classes, so I think creating that professional development for our actual population, especially because we’re so limited on resources, that would be great.” Fostering a culture of support within schools and districts, emphasizing the importance of teamwork and collaboration, will reduce stress and build trust among staff. Schools can ensure that special education teachers can access administrative support, mentorship, and educational resources. They can also establish a feedback mechanism for teachers to communicate their needs and concerns to administrators. Furthermore, schools can ensure adequate staffing of paraprofessionals to reduce the workload on special education teachers.

Special education teachers can facilitate positive relationships with students' families through open communication, meetings, and regular updates to build strong partnerships, especially when dealing with challenging behaviors and disabilities. Districts can improve

financial support for teachers to ensure a higher quality of education and better working conditions. Emily expressed in her journal response,

I buy all the items in my classroom to make sure my students have what they need.

Unfortunately, this takes away money from things I enjoy doing, like shopping or getting my nails done, but I love my students, so it is worth it.

A healthy work-life balance for special education teachers can prevent burnout. The district and schools can offer stress management programs, wellness initiatives, and mental health resources to support teacher well-being and encourage teachers to prioritize self-care and seek support when needed. During the focus group, Sarah shared, “Last year, I started a game night club for the teachers, where once a month, I would host them. I would get food, and we would have a game night. It would give them an outlet and build morale.” To battle feelings of isolation experienced by special education teachers teaching in a self-contained setting, the school can implement strategies to reduce emotional and physical isolation to foster a sense of belonging and inclusion within the school community, including opportunities for collaboration with general education teachers. They can also create shared spaces and resources to facilitate interactions among educators. Special education teachers can share successful practices and evidence-based approaches within their professional community to promote using evidence-based practices in self-contained special education classrooms to improve student outcomes.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the critical theme that emerges from the data is the importance of support for special education teachers, especially those in self-contained settings. Support takes various forms, including administrative backing, paraprofessional assistance, relationships with students’ families, and financial sustenance, profoundly impacting teachers’ experiences and job

satisfaction. While some teachers felt well-supported by their administration and had fully staffed classrooms, others voiced concerns about insufficient support due to inexperience, disorganization, and a lack of understanding of their students' needs. Paraprofessional shortages and inadequate training were also flagged as significant challenges affecting workload and student outcomes. Most participants expressed the significance of solid partnerships between special education teachers and students' families to ensure student success.

An array of stressors and challenges self-contained special education teachers faced was explored, including burnout, emotional exhaustion, and diminished personal accomplishment. Feelings of emotional and physical isolation are highlighted, underscoring the unique circumstances of these teachers and the need for increased recognition and support. Professional development is identified as a critical area for improvement, with many participants expressing a lack of relevant training tailored to their unique roles. The chapter also discusses college preparation and continuing education as essential components of a teacher's professional growth. Possible enhancements, such as increased support, improved professional development, and higher compensation, are suggested to enhance job satisfaction and teacher retention in this challenging yet rewarding field.



## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

This study aimed to gain insight into the experiences of special education teachers who work with students with severe disabilities or EBD, to understand the factors contributing to higher attrition rates. The participants' perceptions of their lived experiences were examined in detail through a transcendental phenomenological approach. The following chapter will examine the thematic findings, policy and practice implications, theoretical and methodological implications, limitations, delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

### **Discussion**

The focus of this section is to analyze the study's discoveries in the context of the identified themes of support, burnout, isolation, professional development, and successful practices. Through an exploration of the real-world experiences of special education teachers in self-contained classrooms with students having severe disabilities or EBD, valuable insights have been gained. This section will examine the interpretation of the study's findings, discussing the implications for policy and practice, the theoretical and empirical framework, limitations, delimitations, and recommendations for future research. The aim is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by special education teachers and offer guidance for policymakers and educators seeking to improve the conditions in this critical field.

### **Summary of Thematic Findings**

The thematic findings from the data reveal several essential views of the experiences of special education teachers in self-contained classrooms working with students with severe disabilities or EBD that include support, burnout, feelings of isolation, professional development, and successful practices. The most prominent theme is support, encompassing administrative,

paraprofessional, family, and financial support. Support varies among participants, with some feeling well-supported. In contrast, others face challenges, including issues related to the administration's understanding of students' needs, building relationships with students' families, paraprofessional shortages, and financial constraints. Challenges surrounding administration included a lack of effort, inexperience, or insufficient understanding of special education needs. The shortage of paraprofessionals had significant impacts on teachers and students. It resulted in reduced individualized support, increased workload, behavior management challenges, and disrupted scheduling. Some participants expressed that their paraprofessionals exhibited unprofessional behavior, further hindering classroom environments. There was a mixed response among participants regarding relationships with students' families. While some special education teachers reported positive relationships, others faced challenges, especially when working with high school-aged students. Financial concerns were another recurring theme, with two participants expressing dissatisfaction with their pay and the need to purchase classroom resources out of their pockets. This financial strain was seen as a significant concern affecting job satisfaction.

Teacher burnout and stress were evident in the data, with participants experiencing stress related to workload, behavior management, and lack of support. The symptoms of burnout, including emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment, were also detected among some participants. Depersonalization, a symptom of burnout, was only mentioned once by one participant. Feelings of emotional and physical isolation were pervasive, impacting the professional well-being of the participants. Many felt disconnected from their peers and needed collaboration and professional development opportunities within the school setting. Professional development was highlighted as a crucial area for improvement, as most participants felt that the

current offerings were not sufficiently tailored to their needs. They desired more training on behavior management, student-specific disabilities, and instructional strategies tailored to their unique teaching environment. Overall, the findings underscore the challenges faced by special education teachers in self-contained settings, emphasizing the need for increased support, professional development, and better financial compensation to improve teacher retention and job satisfaction in this critical field.

### **Critical Discussion**

The findings presented in this research shed light on the complex and multifaceted challenges faced by special education teachers working with students with severe disabilities or EBD in separate settings. The central research question, focusing on the causes of attrition and migration among these teachers, unveils a series of interconnected issues contributing to dissatisfaction, burnout, and, ultimately, departure from their positions. One prominent theme that emerges from the data is the crucial role of support in the professional lives of these teachers. The inadequacy of support from various sources, such as administration, paraprofessionals, and families, is a significant factor contributing to frustration and burnout. Administrative turnover, a lack of understanding of special education, and policy changes compound the challenges teachers face, illustrating the pivotal role that administrative support plays in teacher satisfaction and retention.

Paraprofessional shortages and inadequate training exacerbate the situation, increasing the teacher's workload and stress. The participants expressed frustration at the lack of planning time, duty-free lunch breaks, and the burden of paperwork, highlighting the demanding nature of their roles. The interconnectedness of these stressors, including heavy workloads, challenging student behaviors, and pressure to meet academic standards, creates a web of challenges that

significantly contribute to burnout. Moreover, the emotional and physical isolation experienced by special education teachers teaching in self-contained settings is a critical issue. The study emphasizes the importance of positive relationships with students and their families, collaboration with colleagues, and a sense of belonging within the school community. The lack of tailored professional development and limited access to relevant coursework for college preparation compound dissatisfaction, hindering teachers' ability to meet the unique needs of their students.

Regarding teacher retention, the study highlights the importance of addressing these challenges through tailored interventions and strategies. Tailored professional development programs covering behavior management, sensory needs, and specific disabilities are identified as crucial. Ongoing training in evidence-based practices and support for paraprofessionals are also emphasized. The need for a culture of support within schools and districts, mentorship, and administrative support is highlighted as essential for reducing stress and building trust among staff. Financial support, a healthy work-life balance, and recognition of special education teachers' unique circumstances are also critical factors in retaining teachers in these challenging yet rewarding positions. The study suggests implementing stress management programs, wellness initiatives, and mental health resources to support teacher well-being.

In conclusion, this research provides a comprehensive overview of special education teachers' challenges working with students with severe disabilities or EBD in separate settings. It emphasizes the critical need for support, both in terms of administrative backing and professional development, to enhance job satisfaction and retention in this vital field. The findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, administrators, and educators aiming to improve special education teachers' working conditions and professional experiences.

## **Implications for Policy or Practice**

The insights garnered from the research on special education teachers in self-contained classrooms with severe disabilities or EBD carry significant implications for both policy and practice. These implications prompt a comprehensive approach to policy development and practical adjustments. The collaborative effort among policymakers, administrators, educators, and stakeholders is highlighted as essential for effectively implementing of these policies and practices.

### ***Implications for Policy***

The policy implications based on the findings about special education teachers in self-contained classrooms with severe disabilities or EBD are substantial and multifaceted. Several policy considerations and interventions can be proposed to address the challenges highlighted. Policies centered on administrative support are crucial, including mandatory training programs for administrators. Mandatory training programs for administrators should be developed to enhance their understanding of special education needs, the dynamics of self-contained classrooms, and strategies to support teachers effectively. Additionally, establishing policies addressing paraprofessional shortages, improving training, and setting professional standards are imperative.

Financial aspects also need attention, warranting reviews of salary structures for special education teachers and policies to allocate ample funds for classroom resources, lessening their financial burden. The salary structures for special education teachers should reflect the demanding nature of their roles and provide financial relief. Establishing policies to allocate sufficient funds for classroom resources will reduce the burden of out-of-pocket expenses on teachers. Professional development policies should emphasize tailored programs covering

behavior management, disabilities, and instructional strategies while fostering mentorship and collaboration among teachers to foster a supportive professional environment.

Implementing stress management initiatives, ensuring adequate planning time, and reducing paperwork are crucial to addressing well-being concerns. Policies should be implemented to ensure special education teachers have adequate planning time, duty-free breaks, and reduced paperwork to alleviate the workload burden on teachers. These policy implications should address the multifaceted challenges identified, providing comprehensive support to special education teachers in self-contained settings. Collaboration among policymakers, administrators, educators, and stakeholders is essential to implement these policies effectively and create a conducive environment for teachers and students.

### ***Implications for Practice***

The implications drawn from the research shed light on the profound challenges faced by special education teachers working in self-contained classrooms with students experiencing severe disabilities or EBD. Special education teachers navigating the challenges of stress and burnout face a complex web of interconnected factors that significantly impact their professional well-being. The research highlights burnout symptoms, including emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment, among these educators. The central theme that emerges is the pivotal role of support in the professional lives of these educators. The inadequacy of support, spanning administrative, paraprofessional, family, and financial dimensions, significantly contributes to dissatisfaction and burnout.

The demanding nature of their roles, marked by heavy workloads, behavior management challenges, and the pressure to meet academic standards, contributes to the prevalence of stress. Administrative challenges exacerbate these stressors, such as turnover, inexperience, and

insufficient understanding of special education. The emotional and physical isolation experienced by special education teachers teaching in self-contained settings further intensifies their susceptibility to burnout. Mitigating stress requires a holistic approach, addressing not only workload and behavior management but also fostering positive relationships with students, families, and colleagues. Tailored professional development programs covering behavior management, sensory needs, and specific disabilities are crucial for equipping special education teachers with the skills and strategies to navigate their unique teaching environments. Implementing stress management programs, wellness initiatives, and mental health resources can provide essential support to enhance the overall well-being of special education teachers and contribute to their retention in these challenging yet rewarding positions.

### **Empirical and Theoretical Implications**

This section addresses the theoretical and empirical implications of the study. The empirical implications highlight special education teachers' challenges, needs, and coping mechanisms. In contrast, the theoretical implications align the findings with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, emphasizing the impact on teacher well-being and job satisfaction. Furthermore, the study examines the practical applications of these implications, offering recommendations for educational institutions and policymakers to enhance support systems for special education teachers. By uncovering the intricate relationship between the challenges faced by these educators and the broader framework of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological and emotional aspects influencing the teaching profession.

#### ***Empirical Implications***

This section examines special education teachers' multifaceted roles, emphasizing their diverse responsibilities, from addressing students' unique needs to administrative tasks like writing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and managing paraprofessionals. The participants highlighted critical qualities and skills necessary for success, such as advocacy, systematic instruction, individualization, high expectations, positivity, flexibility, and continual improvement. The participants' experiences were cross-referenced with the related literature. The rich experiences of the participants provided valuable insights that can be cross-referenced with existing literature in the field of special education. The participants' narratives align with and contribute to the broader scholarly discourse on the challenges faced by special education teachers.

**Qualities and Skills of Special Education Teachers.** Special education teachers play diverse roles within the education system, with a minority of them working with students with severe disabilities or EBD. They are responsible for identifying and addressing challenges, adapting instruction, providing support for students with disabilities, and addressing unique needs like medical care, life skills, and behavior intervention. Aside from having responsibilities regarding student needs, special education teachers are also responsible for writing IEPs, progress monitoring, managing and training paraprofessionals, and building and maintaining relationships with the student's families (de Swart et al., 2023). Ruppert et al. (2017) describe core skills and qualities special education teachers working with severe disabilities or EBD would benefit from possessing: advocacy, systematic instruction and academics, individualization and collegial relationships, high expectations, positivity, flexibility, and continual improvement. These qualities and skills are intertwined and essential for effectively meeting their students' needs.



The findings from this study support the current literature from Ruppert et al. (2017), emphasizing the crucial role of advocacy in the education of students with severe disabilities or EBD. Advocacy encompasses a range of actions by special education teachers to ensure these students' safety, health, independence, social integration, and academic challenges. The participants in the study demonstrated various successful practices in advocating for their students' needs. For instance, one participant highlighted in the journal response the importance of providing specialized instruction and gradual integration into general education settings, acknowledging the significant progress made by students when given appropriate support. Additionally, within the interviews, journal responses, and focus groups, participants emphasized the importance of building strong relationships with students and their families, facilitating their sense of belonging and support within the educational environment. Examples provided by participants underscored the positive outcomes of advocacy efforts, such as increased social interaction, peer acceptance, and functional independence in real-world settings. These empirical insights suggest that special education teachers play a pivotal role in advocating for the holistic development and inclusion of students with severe disabilities or EBD, challenging the misconception that these students should be limited in their academic and social opportunities. By holding high expectations and implementing effective advocacy strategies, educators can empower students to achieve meaningful progress and participate fully in their communities.

The findings from this study support the current literature, emphasizing the pivotal role that systematic instruction and academics play in the education of students with severe disabilities or EBD, as highlighted by Ruppert et al. (2017). This approach involves special education teachers utilizing observations to develop a structured, step-by-step teaching method tailored to meet each student's individual needs. Access to age-appropriate academic content is

essential for teacher and student success. Participants in the study demonstrated various successful practices in implementing systematic instruction to support their student's academic growth and development. For example, one participant emphasized during the individual interview differentiating lessons while maintaining high expectations, focusing on life skills and functional abilities to prepare students for lifelong success. Another participant highlighted in their interview the effectiveness of visual cues and individualized instruction to ensure understanding and engagement, even though it sometimes led to initial student resistance. Additionally, participants emphasized within the interviews, journal responses, and focus groups the significance of one-on-one interaction, movement breaks, and flexible seating arrangements to maximize student learning and engagement. These examples underscore the importance of adapting instruction to meet the unique needs of students with severe disabilities or EBD, requiring special education teachers to demonstrate professional creativity and dedication in their instructional practices. By employing systematic instruction methods and continually adapting to individual needs, educators can effectively support the academic progress and overall well-being of their students with disabilities.

The findings from this study align with existing literature, reinforcing the significance of collegial relationships, as underscored by Ruppert et al. (2017). These relationships encompass interactions with paraprofessionals, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members, all aimed at meeting the diverse needs of the students. The academic achievement of students with special needs depends on the quality of collaborations between families and schools (Brooks et al., 2023). Participants in the study highlighted the significance of supportive relationships within the educational environment. For instance, during an interview, one participant praised their special education director for providing valuable resources and support,

such as assistive technology devices, to meet the unique needs of students. Another participant expressed in the journal response their appreciation for the unwavering support of their supervisor, who encouraged professional growth and development through educational leadership programs.

Additionally, participants emphasized within the interviews, journal responses, and focus groups the crucial role of paraprofessionals in supporting students with disabilities, highlighting the importance of clear communication and shared understanding of expectations and student needs. These examples emphasize the importance of fostering positive collegial relationships characterized by understanding, support, and shared commitment to the success and well-being of students with severe disabilities or EBD. By nurturing such relationships, educators, and stakeholders can create an inclusive and supportive educational environment that maximizes student learning and growth opportunities. Notably, positive relationships established with students and their families are significant in informing teachers' decisions regarding the persistence of their positions. According to prior research, collaborative efforts between families and schools could prove highly impactful for adolescents grappling with emotional and behavioral challenges. Given the contextual complexity of such issues and the crucial role of support across various environments, interventions that bridge the gap between home and school settings may offer significant benefits (Garbacz et al., 2022).

The ability to work effectively often depends on the support they receive from their colleagues, administrators, and student's families. All participants expressed a lack of support from their colleagues, administrators, or student's families. Administrative support is crucial for special education teachers. Aligned with established literature, special education teachers tasked with supporting students diagnosed with severe disabilities or EBD require robust administrative

backing, prompt assistance from school leadership, and collaborative engagement with fellow faculty members to optimize their efficacy in catering to these students' needs. The inherent isolation of their educational environment often impedes meaningful interactions with other school stakeholders. Consequently, this lack of interconnectivity restricts access to valuable resources that could otherwise foster inclusivity and promote achievement among students grappling with severe disabilities and EBD (Bettini et al., 2022). Effective administrators can provide mentorship and educational opportunities and help teachers make decisions, positively impacting students' education (O'Brien et al., 2019).

The findings from this study echo the empirical implications that extend beyond instructional expertise and behavior management to encompass financial wisdom for special education teachers, as highlighted by Blackburn (2021). The challenge of low pay faced by special education teachers highlights the necessity for adept budgeting and resource management. This financial strain and limited access to comprehensive professional development increase stress levels and burnout among educators. The data from participants accentuates the critical need for ongoing professional development tailored to the unique requirements of teaching students with severe disabilities or EBD. Hirsch et al. (2022) note the inadequacy of existing training programs in addressing the nuanced demands of classroom management and evidence-based instructional strategies. Consequently, the efficacy of professional learning initiatives in effecting substantive change remains limited. Participants desired enhanced support, increased professional development opportunities, and improved compensation. Thus, the quality and proficiency of special education teachers are intrinsically linked to the level of support, professional development, and income provided within the educational landscape. A scarcity of these resources adversely affects the efficacy of educators,

underscoring the imperative of robust support systems to bolster the skills and effectiveness of special education practitioners (Hirsch et al., 2022).

**Attrition Rates in the Educational Field.** The findings from this study support the current literature, indicating that in special education, the sector grapples with teacher shortages and a notable deficiency in retention rates (Theobald et al., 2021). A notable predictor of attrition within this domain lies in the absence of administrative support. Special education educators are often confronted with distinct challenges concerning evaluations and support stemming from the unique characteristics inherent to their roles. Administrative support plays a pivotal role, with issues encompassing administrative turnover, a lack of understanding of special education, and policy changes leading to job dissatisfaction (K. C. Herman et al., 2023). Some participants experienced frequent changes in administration, leading to confusion and a lack of support. This inconsistency in leadership can demotivate teachers and contribute to their decision to leave their positions.

As evidenced by participants' accounts, the lack of administrative support is a recurrent theme in their experiences. For instance, one participant expressed in the individual interview the apparent absence of effort from the administration, noting their lack of support for the behavior program. Similarly, another participant highlighted the principal's ineffectiveness in addressing daily challenges in the focus group discussion. Another participant explained in the individual interview the impact of administrative turnover and resultant policy changes, leading to instability and lack of confidence among teachers. This inconsistency in leadership disrupts the continuity of support and erodes teacher morale, ultimately contributing to attrition within the special education sector. Thus, ensuring robust administrative support is imperative for retaining

special education teachers and fostering a conducive working environment for meeting the diverse needs of students with severe disabilities or EBD.

The findings from this study support the current literature, indicating that the evaluation process of special education teachers serving students with severe disabilities or EBD is influenced by the administrative team's understanding of the unique qualities and skills required for this demographic, as highlighted by Ruppert et al. (2017). However, my study suggests that administrators may lack a comprehensive understanding of these educators' specific needs and challenges. Evaluations conducted using instruments designed for general education teachers may not adequately capture the specialized expertise and efforts required in special education settings. Moreover, participants' examples highlighted a disconnect between administrators and special education teachers, with limited support and assistance offered in the classroom despite positive interactions. This disparity in understanding and support can have significant implications for the attrition of special education teachers, as educators may feel undervalued and unsupported in their roles. Therefore, addressing this gap in understanding and providing tailored support and evaluation mechanisms for special education teachers serving students with severe disabilities or EBD is crucial in mitigating attrition rates and ensuring the retention of skilled and dedicated educators in the field.

The findings from this study align with existing literature, indicating that job dissatisfaction and attrition among special education educators serving students with severe disabilities or EBD are exacerbated by various factors. These include the lack of designated planning and duty-free lunch periods, challenging student behaviors, inadequate professional development opportunities, unsupportive paraprofessionals, limited communication with student's families, and overwhelming paperwork and administrative duties. Consistent with prior

research, special education teachers struggle to manage interpersonal interactions, including having additional responsibilities imposed on them, not having their planning periods due to behavioral crises that disrupt them, and having a dedicated time for collaboration with colleagues and paraprofessionals (Bettini et al., 2022). A need for designated planning periods or duty-free lunches underscores the importance of adequate time for self-care and planning, essential for managing workload and mitigating stress. This was expressed in interviews, journal responses, and focus groups. Failure to address these challenges can increase teacher burnout and contribute to attrition within the special education workforce. Therefore, addressing these empirical findings is crucial for enhancing job satisfaction, reducing attrition rates, and retaining skilled special education educators in the field.

The findings from this study support the current literature, highlighting empirical implications regarding the attrition of special education teachers. This emphasizes a concerning trend wherein educators tend to migrate toward schools with higher student achievement and students from more affluent backgrounds, leaving high-poverty schools disproportionately affected by the shortage (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Feng & Sass, 2018). Examples provided by participants further elucidate this phenomenon, highlighting stark disparities in resources and support between schools serving affluent versus low-income communities. One participant noted a stark contrast between their current position in a more affluent area, characterized by abundant resources and parental involvement, and their previous experience in a less affluent area. Another participant from a Title 1 school emphasized the lack of resources and financial support, necessitating personal investment in classroom supplies. Such disparities not only exacerbate the challenges faced by educators in high-poverty schools but also contribute to feelings of frustration and disillusionment, ultimately driving attrition rates higher.

Consequently, addressing the unequal distribution of resources and support across schools is imperative for mitigating attrition and ensuring equitable educational opportunities for all students, regardless of socioeconomic background.

The findings from this study support the current literature, indicating that challenging behaviors and disruptive students can create a hostile work environment and lead to teacher attrition. Consistent with prior research, special education teachers teaching students with EBD often struggle with student behaviors and classroom management, which consequently results in career frustration, negative emotions, exhaustion, and underperformance. These challenges significantly contribute to teacher burnout and attrition rates (Granger et al., 2023). In some cases, the participants mentioned conflicts with paraprofessionals, which can add to their stress and make their work more challenging. According to prior research, collaboration between teachers and paraprofessionals is vital for managing disruptive student behaviors and promoting positive outcomes. Their differing perspectives highlight the importance of effective communication and interpersonal connections, fostering trust and openness. Establishing strong teacher-paraprofessional relationships is crucial for facilitating effective support for students' needs. The working environment is less desirable when the relationship between the teacher and paraprofessionals is strained (Bronstein et al., 2022). Thus, the empirical implication highlights the critical need for fostering effective communication, trust, and collaboration between special education teachers and paraprofessionals to mitigate the negative impact of challenging behaviors and improve teacher retention rates in special education settings.

The study's findings support the current literature, emphasizing the empirical implications regarding the labor imbalance within schools due to teacher attrition. This highlights the detrimental effects on school improvement efforts, as underscored by Carver-Thomas and



Darling-Hammond (2019). In response to staffing shortages, schools may increase class sizes or hire inexperienced or underqualified teachers. However, these adjustments can have negative consequences, including heightened negative student behavior and decreased student achievement. Participants' experiences further reveal the challenges arising from staffing imbalances within schools. For instance, participants noted instances of paraprofessionals refusing to work with certain students or disruptions caused by changes in staffing levels, resulting in increased workload and diminished support for teachers. Additionally, inadequate training and low pay for support staff contribute to issues such as discipline problems and inconsistent performance, further exacerbating school labor imbalance. Moreover, the lack of consequences for misconduct among support staff can perpetuate a culture of lax discipline and undermine the learning environment. Therefore, addressing the labor imbalance within schools is imperative for fostering a conducive learning environment and promoting positive student outcomes.

**Stress and Burnout of Special Education Teachers.** The findings from this study support the current literature, indicating that most research suggests teacher attrition is primarily driven by stress and burnout, which tend to develop gradually and worsen over time. Special education teachers are more susceptible to burnout due to job dissatisfaction and the heavy burden of paperwork and legal requirements (Park & Shin, 2020). Teacher burnout is characterized by prolonged stress, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a sense of lost personal accomplishment, leading to issues in delivering quality education and job dissatisfaction. It can also negatively impact student academic achievement, resulting in harsher behavior management strategies. The participants shared experiences that resulted in stress, which aligned with the research.

The findings from this study support the current literature, emphasizing the empirical implications regarding stress and burnout among educators. This accentuates the pervasive nature of these issues within the teaching profession, as evidenced by research findings (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Eddy et al., 2019). Stress and burnout tend to escalate gradually over time, exacerbated by heavy workloads and administrative burdens (Park & Shin, 2020). Special education teachers face heightened levels of burnout, primarily attributed to lower job satisfaction and the overwhelming burden of legal paperwork requirements (Pavlidou et al., 2022). Participant responses further reveal the sources of stress and burnout, including working beyond contracted hours, heavy paperwork loads, and increased administrative duties. These additional responsibilities detract from teaching and contribute to feelings of burnout among educators (Brunsting et al., 2024). Moreover, special education teachers encounter unique occupational demands related to behavior management and emotional regulation, which can lead to emotional exhaustion and reduced job satisfaction (Gilmour et al., 2022). The perceived lack of job success and work overload stemming from custodial and managerial tasks exacerbates feelings of burnout among educators. Therefore, addressing the root causes of stress and burnout, such as excessive paperwork and inadequate support, is imperative for promoting educator well-being and retention within the teaching profession.

My research findings align with existing literature, highlighting that novice teachers, particularly those with five or fewer years of experience, are prone to experiencing higher levels of stress and burnout compared to more seasoned educators (Stark & Koslouski, 2021). This trend is further exacerbated by the discrepancy between the investment of time and effort in teaching and the perceived outcomes, contributing to feelings of burnout among novice educators (Pavlidou et al., 2022). Participant responses provide firsthand insights into this

phenomenon, with one participant expressing contemplation of leaving the profession during their first year of teaching students with emotionally disturbed behavior disorders and autism. This example highlights the acute challenges novice teachers face, mainly when working with students with complex needs, which can lead to feelings of overwhelm and disillusionment. Educators working with students diagnosed with EBD are most prone to exiting the education profession, largely attributed to the instructional and student management hurdles they encounter (Henderson et al., 2005). While novice teachers may possess basic classroom management strategies, effectively selecting and implementing appropriate interventions often requires years of experience (Pavlidou & Alevriadou, 2022). Therefore, addressing the unique stressors faced by novice teachers and providing tailored support and mentorship programs are crucial for mitigating burnout and promoting retention within the teaching profession.

The findings from this study support the current literature, indicating that teacher assignments, especially in special education, are a significant factor in attrition. Teachers working with students with EBD have higher attrition rates due to challenging student behaviors (Eddy et al., 2019). Students diagnosed with EBD frequently encounter challenges in managing their emotions and behaviors. Consequently, educators are tasked with the significant responsibility of navigating various student emotions and behaviors with composure and empathy. This demanding aspect of teaching often leads to feelings of burnout among teachers who work with students with EBD (Brunsting et al., 2024). Complex student behaviors and the time required to learn effective interventions can lead to burnout, along with factors like slow student progress, unrealistic parental expectations, and a lack of planning time. Participants identified a lack of support in managing challenging student behavior as a significant stressor from administrative and parental sources. Therefore, addressing the challenges associated with

teacher assignments in special education, particularly in managing student behaviors, is crucial for mitigating burnout and promoting teacher retention.

The findings from this study support the current literature, indicating that special education teachers working with students with severe disabilities or EBD often face diverse challenges beyond traditional education. This is particularly true given that many students with severe disabilities have physical limitations affecting their behavior and coordination (Cheng et al., 2016). Interactions between staff and students that result in physical injury commonly include managing acting-out behaviors, breaking up fights, restraining students, handling incidental events, and navigating daily life and play-related occurrences. Participants recounted instances of physical harm or risk, such as a student engaging in extreme behaviors like stripping and self-harm, verbal abuse, or destroying classroom property, leading to heightened stress and anxiety among teachers. Additionally, feelings of isolation and emotional exhaustion were prevalent among teachers, particularly when dealing with the emotional and traumatic experiences of students. These experiences highlight the need for comprehensive support, training, and resources to address special education teachers' physical and emotional well-being and mitigate the risks of physical injuries and burnout in their professional roles.

Organizational factors, such as a lack of clarity about job responsibilities and role conflict, contribute to on-the-job stress and teacher burnout. A supportive school climate is crucial to mitigating these factors. Seven participants did not have a duty-free lunch or defined planning period, which led to additional stress. Dissatisfaction with pay is generally not a leading cause of teacher attrition, but low salaries can hinder the fulfillment of basic needs, affecting teachers' job satisfaction. Two participants mentioned low pay as a stressor. In summary, teacher attrition, especially in special education, is influenced by complex factors, including stress,

burnout, physical injuries, challenging student behaviors, organizational climate, and personal circumstances. Understanding and addressing these factors can help reduce teacher attrition rates and improve the teaching environment.

**Teacher Preparation and Qualifications.** The empirical implications of addressing the teacher shortage reveal a multifaceted approach adopted by districts nationwide, as Harris et al. (2019) outlined. In response to the shortage, various strategies have been employed, including initiatives to attract professionals from other fields to transition into teaching as a mid-career switch, offering alternative certification programs, recruiting teacher candidates internationally, and providing financial incentives such as bonuses or student loan forgiveness. This study aligns with current research that emphasizes the necessity for diverse and innovative solutions to combat the ongoing challenges in the education sector, echoing the findings of previous investigations into strategies aimed at mitigating teacher shortages. Participant experiences corroborate these findings, with four participants highlighting their transition into teaching from other fields, necessitating additional certifications or degrees to qualify. This demonstrates the importance of flexible pathways in the teaching profession to alleviate shortages and meet the growing demand for qualified educators. All participants possess at least a bachelor's degree, with six individuals holding advanced degrees. It is noteworthy that only one participant acquired a bachelor's degree in the specialized domain of special education. Most participants initially pursued bachelor's degrees in unrelated fields or other fields of education and subsequently pursued certification or advanced degrees in special education. A significant portion of the participants expressed a sense of unpreparedness for their current roles. Consistent with previous research, findings indicate that teachers often lack preparedness to address the requirements of students with EBD. Research demonstrates infrequent utilization of effective

instructional methods and classroom management strategies when teaching this demographic (Gilmour et al., 2022).

The dynamics between special education teachers and paraprofessionals emphasize the integral role paraprofessionals play within self-contained classrooms, as highlighted by Biggs et al. (2019), which aligns with my research findings. Despite their significance, special education teachers often lack adequate preparation to supervise and collaborate with paraprofessionals to enhance student achievement effectively. While some teacher preparation programs may cover topics related to working with paraprofessionals, competency requirements are typically absent, leaving teachers ill-equipped for the task (T. L. Fisher et al., 2022). Participants' experiences further expose this issue, with concerns raised about the lack of training and support for paraprofessionals, coupled with inadequate compensation. Instances of paraprofessionals refusing to work with certain students or exhibiting inappropriate behavior further exacerbate the challenges faced by special education teachers. The demands of managing classroom dynamics, addressing student behaviors, and navigating instructional strategies leave little room for comprehensive training of paraprofessionals during the hectic school day. Thus, enhancing training opportunities and support for paraprofessionals emerges as a crucial area for improving the effectiveness of special education programs and ultimately enhancing student outcomes.

**Teacher Coping.** The empirical implications surrounding teacher effectiveness and self-efficacy challenge the notion that increased experience inevitably leads to higher retention rates within the profession, as noted by Scott et al. (2022). While it's commonly believed that teachers become more effective and confident over time, this belief does not always align with reality. Despite entering the profession with intentions to stay beyond the initial five years, many new teachers exit due to stress and burnout during this critical period. This study aligns with current

research highlighting the complexity of factors contributing to teacher retention and effectiveness. It emphasizes the importance of implementing multifaceted approaches, such as those outlined by Harris et al. (2019), to address the underlying challenges and support educators throughout their careers. The examples provided by participants shed light on alternative teacher efficacy and satisfaction indicators. One participant, for instance, emphasizes the profound impact of building relationships with students and witnessing their growth, not solely confined to academic achievements but encompassing social and adaptive skills. Similarly, the experiences shared by other participants highlight the significance of witnessing tangible progress in students, such as achieving milestones like potty training or implementing new teaching methods with positive outcomes. These examples underscore the importance of recognizing diverse teacher effectiveness and self-efficacy measures beyond traditional metrics, offering insights into factors contributing to teacher satisfaction and retention within the profession. How an educator perceives a given situation significantly influences their approach to it.

Various factors about a teacher's capacity to cope encompass the extent of their support system, the composition of their student body, and their professional preparedness for their educational role (Scott et al., 2022). During the study, participants shared valuable insights into coping mechanisms when confronted with stressful situations. Those who reported receiving adequate support from administrators and fostering positive relationships with colleagues and students' families experienced lower stress levels than their counterparts. Coping with stress and burnout, self-care, and seeking support are critical skills for special education teachers to maintain their well-being. This study aligns with current research that emphasizes the significance of support systems and coping mechanisms in mitigating stress and burnout among educators, shedding light on practical strategies to enhance teacher well-being and retention.

Previous research has demonstrated that teachers facing heightened stress levels and limited coping mechanisms are more susceptible to experiencing burnout (K. C. Herman et al., 2023). However, the findings also indicate a gap in adopting such coping mechanisms, with only one participant actively scheduling time for self-care. Additionally, a significant proportion of participants exhibited a coping strategy characterized by compliance, accepting their circumstances without actively seeking ways to address or alleviate stressors. These findings show the importance of promoting effective coping strategies and support systems among special education teachers to mitigate the risk of burnout and ensure their long-term well-being in the profession.

The findings from this study support the current literature, shedding light on critical empirical implications regarding special education teachers' social dynamics and emotional experiences, particularly those serving students with severe disabilities or EBD. Research by Price and Collett (2012) discusses the importance of fostering positive social interactions among teachers within the school environment to enhance teacher commitment and retention. Positive staff interactions contribute to a sense of cohesion and enthusiasm for work, ultimately reducing turnover rates. However, the data findings reveal a contrasting reality for many special education teachers, who often experience profound feelings of isolation, both emotionally and physically. Participants frequently described a lack of peer support, difficulty collaborating with colleagues, and a sense of disempowerment in decision-making processes concerning their students. This pervasive isolation not only exacerbates stress levels but also hinders the development of emotional connections with students, which are crucial for teacher retention (Bettini et al., 2022). Examples provided by participants further reveal the multifaceted nature of isolation, encompassing emotional disconnection from peers and administrators, as well as physical



separation from the broader school community. These insights highlight the pressing need for educational institutions to prioritize creating inclusive and supportive environments that foster positive social interactions among teachers, thereby mitigating feelings of isolation and promoting teacher well-being and retention in special education settings.

**Potential Solutions.** The findings from this study support the current literature, as the empirical implications derived from the literature review and participant responses highlight several potential solutions to address the challenges faced by special education teachers, particularly those working in self-contained classrooms catering to students with diverse needs. Fixed salaries and limited opportunities for advancement contribute to higher attrition rates among special education teachers, leading to early burnout and feelings of isolation (K. Herman, 2023). Efforts to retain teachers in these challenging roles include implementing tailored professional development programs covering behavior management, sensory needs, and specific disabilities, as emphasized by participants (Finlay et al., 2022). Additionally, enhancing classroom support and lowering student-to-adult ratios are crucial factors in improving job satisfaction and retention. Professional development opportunities focusing on the specific needs of special education students are essential for equipping teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary to address the unique challenges they encounter. Moreover, participants expressed the importance of fostering a supportive school culture through team building and providing sufficient planning periods and lunch breaks to prevent teacher burnout. Addressing teacher retention challenges requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses tailored professional development, increased support, and enhancements in pay structures to create a more satisfying and sustainable teaching environment for special education teachers.

### ***Theoretical Implications***

This section offers a comprehensive application of Maslow's hierarchy of needs within the educational context, specifically focusing on special education teachers. The hierarchy is a guiding framework to understand the impact of physiological, safety, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization needs on educators' well-being and effectiveness. The section on physiological needs highlights the critical link between educators' compensation, financial strain, and the fulfillment of basic survival needs. Safety needs reveal the collective impact of external factors, such as the shortage of paraprofessionals, on classroom dynamics and overall security. Love and belonging needs underscore the importance of positive relationships with families and colleagues, emphasizing the significance of building a supportive community within educational institutions. Furthermore, the discussion on self-esteem needs accentuates the role of professional development in enhancing educators' self-worth and confidence. Lastly, the section on self-actualization showcases the unique challenges special education teachers face and their commitment to students' well-being, challenging the notion of self-actualization as solely an individual pursuit. These insights illuminate the interconnected nature of educators' well-being, classroom dynamics, and the pursuit of professional and personal fulfillment.

**Physiological Needs.** Physiological needs are the foundational and most basic needs in Maslow's hierarchy. They include air, water, food, shelter, sleep, and clothing. These physiological needs are considered the most fundamental because they are necessary for immediate survival and form the base upon which higher-level needs, such as safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization, are built (M. H. Fisher & Crawford, 2020). According to Maslow's theory, individuals must satisfy these basic physiological needs before effectively pursuing the needs at higher levels of the hierarchy. When applied to educators, the fulfillment of physiological needs is primarily contingent upon their compensation. Some participants

expressed dissatisfaction regarding inadequate salaries and needing funding resources for their classrooms. In 2023, the nation faces inflation, yet the participants' wages have not experienced a corresponding increase (Thompson et al., 2023). Consequently, this has induced stress among these individuals, impeding their ability to maintain a comfortable standard of living and necessitating significant financial sacrifices (Lambooy, 2023).

**Safety Needs.** The second level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs is safety needs. This level encompasses the basic human needs for safety, security, and stability. These needs include physical safety, emotional safety, financial security, health, and job security (Yurdakul & Arar, 2023). Some participants felt fully supported by their administration, while others did not. Those who did not feel supported had concerns about their job security and the impact on their students. The shortage of paraprofessionals in classrooms affected the safety and security of both teachers and students, as it increased workload and reduced behavior management capabilities. Low pay and buying resources out of pocket were significant concerns for some participants, affecting their financial security.

**Love and Belonging.** The third level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs is love and belonging, which encompasses the need for social connections, interpersonal relationships, and a sense of belonging within a community or group. Love and belonging are essential for emotional well-being and are fundamental for human happiness and psychological health. In Maslow's hierarchy, these needs come after the more basic physiological and safety needs and are followed by higher-level needs such as esteem and self-actualization (Dutil, 2022). The participants in this study have shown the need for love and belonging in multiple ways. The participants' relationships with students' families were divided, with some feeling supported and others facing challenges. Positive relationships with families can contribute to a sense of belonging and

support. Most participants shared positive stories about their relationships with their students and the joy they bring. Not all the participants expressed met needs in the area of love and belonging. Many participants felt isolated from the school's general population and lacked support from their administration and colleagues, which can impact their well-being. Isolation can hinder their ability to fulfill their social and esteem needs. Emotional exhaustion can be related to a lack of emotional support and positive relationships with colleagues and administrators.

**Self-esteem.** Self-esteem is the fourth component of Maslow's theory, which involves an individual's evaluation of their self-worth and the degree to which they respect and value themselves. It relates to feelings of self-respect, self-confidence, and a positive self-image. Self-esteem needs are above basic physiological and safety needs and are considered essential for psychological well-being. When people have their self-esteem needs met, they are more likely to feel confident, competent, and valued. They are also more inclined to engage in activities that boost their self-esteem, such as pursuing achievements and gaining the respect and recognition of others. All the participants highlighted the need for professional development and training. Like other educators, special education teachers need growth and skill development opportunities to feel accomplished in their roles. Successful practices can lead to a sense of accomplishment and belonging in the teaching profession. All the participants used successful practices with their students. These practices are crucial for the progress of students with disabilities and align with the concept of teachers meeting the unique needs of their students.

**Self-actualization.** Self-actualization is the highest level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Self-actualization represents the realization of one's full potential and the pursuit of personal growth, creativity, and a sense of fulfillment. It is important to note that not everyone reaches the self-actualization stage, and many people may move up and down the hierarchy throughout their

lives, depending on their circumstances and personal development (Boogren, 2018). Special education teachers in self-contained classrooms often work with students who have severe disabilities or emotional and behavioral disorders. Despite their challenges, the participants firmly commit to their students' well-being and development. The participants understand that student progress may differ from non-disabled peers. They focus on nurturing students' growth, including smaller, incremental steps. Their dedication to helping students acquire functional skills and achieve personal milestones reflects a deep sense of purpose and the pursuit of self-actualization. The participants developed and refined unique teaching and behavior management strategies that work for their specific students. When they find successful practices and witness positive outcomes in their students, this can be a source of personal accomplishment and self-actualization.

In conclusion, applying Maslow's hierarchy of needs within the educational context, specifically among special education teachers, provides a profound understanding of the intricate interplay between educators' well-being, classroom dynamics, and the pursuit of professional and personal fulfillment. The analysis of physiological needs underscores the critical connection between compensation, financial strain, and the ability to meet basic survival needs, shedding light on the stress induced by inadequate wages and educators' financial sacrifices. The psychological toll of financial strain, precarious work conditions, and safety worries, coupled with any health considerations, can manifest in teachers as symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression (Vermote et al., 2022). Safety needs reveal the impact of external factors, such as the shortage of paraprofessionals, on the security of the learning environment and the well-being of teachers. Love and belonging needs emphasize the importance of positive relationships with

families and colleagues, illuminating the challenges some educators face in building a supportive community within educational institutions.

The discussion on self-esteem needs highlights the role of professional development in enhancing educators' self-worth and confidence, linking personal growth to psychological well-being. Lastly, exploring self-actualization examines into special education teachers' unique challenges and commitment to students' well-being, portraying self-actualization as a collective pursuit rather than an individual accomplishment. Regarding teachers' well-being and job satisfaction, it is posited that once fundamental needs such as a sense of achievement are fulfilled, teachers may reach their maximum capabilities and creatively express themselves (Walter & Fox, 2021). In essence, Maslow's framework serves as a comprehensive lens through which to view and address the diverse needs of special education teachers, providing valuable insights for fostering a nurturing educational environment that supports educators and students on their paths to fulfillment.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Limitations and delimitations provide critical insights into the qualitative phenomenological study exploring the experiences of special education teachers dealing with severe disabilities or EBD. Two primary limitations were identified: sampling bias and a lack of investigation into systemic factors contributing to high attrition rates. These limitations are acknowledged as potentially impacting the generalizability and comprehensiveness of the study's findings. Additionally, the delimitations of choosing a phenomenological approach over ethnographic and selecting transcendental phenomenology over hermeneutic are outlined, highlighting the focus on individual experiences and shared meaning among participants. Despite these constraints, the dissertation aims to contribute valuable insights into the challenges and

opportunities faced by special education teachers, paving the way for future research directions and evidence-based interventions in the field.

### ***Limitations***

There were two limitations found in this qualitative phenomenological study. The first is regarding sampling bias. The use of social media outlets for participant recruitment may introduce sampling bias. Teachers who are active on social media platforms may differ in characteristics or experiences from those who are not. This could impact the generalizability of the findings. There was also limited exploration of systematic factors. The study focuses on individual experiences, and while this is valuable, it might be beneficial to explore systemic factors contributing to high attrition rates, such as school policies, administrative support, and broader educational system issues. Addressing or acknowledging these limitations in the study's findings and conclusions will contribute to a more transparent and nuanced interpretation of the research results.

### ***Delimitations***

One delimitation of this study is choosing a phenomenological study over an ethnographic study. Phenomenology is concerned with exploring and understanding the lived experiences of individuals. In this study, the primary aim is to delve into the experiences of special education teachers dealing with severe disabilities or EBD. The focus is on understanding the subjective meaning that these teachers attribute to their experiences. On the other hand, ethnography typically involves studying cultures and communities over an extended period, emphasizing observing and participating in daily activities. While both phenomenology and ethnography involve qualitative inquiry, the central focus of phenomenology is on the individual's experience.

Another delimitation of this study is choosing transcendental over hermeneutic. Transcendental phenomenology seeks to find a common meaning of an experience shared by several individuals. This study explores shared experiences among special education teachers facing challenges in teaching students with severe disabilities or EBD. Transcendental phenomenological studies emphasize perceiving something as if it has occurred for the first time, using a fresh set of eyes rather than relying on the researcher's interpretation. This study emphasizes the participants' experiences, allowing them to provide their perspectives without heavy influence from the researcher's preconceptions. There was also a limited exploration of positive experiences. The research questions and focus were primarily oriented toward understanding the negative aspects of teaching students with severe disabilities or EBD. Questions that explore positive experiences and factors contributing to teacher satisfaction were included, but incorporating more could provide a more comprehensive picture.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Considering the study's findings, limitations, and delimitations, several recommendations and directions for future research emerge, aiming to contribute to enhancing and expanding research in special education. The study's thematic findings, encompassing support, burnout, isolation, professional development, and successful practices, provide valuable insights into the real-world experiences of special education teachers in self-contained classrooms dealing with students with severe disabilities or EBD. While the current study primarily focused on understanding the challenges faced by special education teachers, future research should incorporate a more comprehensive exploration of positive experiences. Investigating factors that contribute to teacher satisfaction, fulfillment, and success can provide a balanced and nuanced perspective on the profession. Further research should also focus on assessing the effectiveness



of tailored professional development programs in addressing the specific needs of special education teachers. Investigating how ongoing training in evidence-based practices and support for paraprofessionals contribute to improved job satisfaction and retention is crucial for shaping future interventions. Addressing the recommendations and exploring the suggested directions for future research will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by special education teachers in self-contained settings. The aim is to inform evidence-based policies, interventions, and practices that enhance teacher satisfaction, retention, and well-being in this critical field.

### **Conclusion**

In light of extensive research and empirical findings, it is evident that special education teachers, particularly those working with severe disabilities or emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD), confront significant challenges, leading to high attrition rates and burnout. These challenges encompass multifaceted factors such as heavy workloads, administrative burdens, inadequate support systems, and insufficient compensation. The study emphasizes the interconnected nature of these issues and underscores the crucial need for tailored interventions to enhance support, provide professional development opportunities, and improve job satisfaction and retention. Drawing from Maslow's hierarchy of needs, theoretical implications highlight the importance of fulfilling educators' basic psychological and emotional needs to create a conducive environment for professional growth and student success. By addressing these challenges and fostering a supportive school culture, educational institutions can cultivate resilience among special education teachers and promote positive outcomes for educators and students.

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## Appendix A

### IRB Approval

Date: 2-25-2024

**IRB #:** IRB-FY22-23-1823

**Title:** Qualitative Study of High Attrition Rates of Special Education Teachers Working with Students who have Severe Disabilities or Emotional Behavioral Disorders

**Creation Date:** 6-28-2023

**End Date:**

**Status:** Approved

**Principal Investigator:** Cara Lord


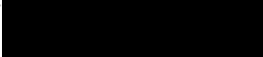
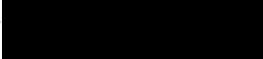
**Review Board:** Research Ethics Office

**Sponsor:**

#### Study History

<b>Submission Type</b> Initial	<b>Review Type</b> Limited	<b>Decision</b> <span style="color: red;">Exempt - Limited IRB</span>
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#### Key Study Contacts

<b>Member</b> Barbara White	<b>Role</b> Co-Principal Investigator	<b>Contact</b> 
<b>Member</b> Cara Lord	<b>Role</b> Principal Investigator	<b>Contact</b> 
<b>Member</b> Cara Lord	<b>Role</b> Primary Contact	<b>Contact</b> 

## Appendix B

### Consent

**Title of the Project:** Qualitative Study of High Attrition Rates of Special Education Teachers Working with Students who have Severe Disabilities and Emotional Behavioral Disorders

**Principal Investigator:** Cara Lord, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

#### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be an adaptive special education teacher currently teaching in a separate setting within the United States or moved from a separate setting position within the past two years, must have had experiences with educating students who have severe disabilities and Emotional Behavioral Disorders, and must also have a valid teaching certificate for the state in which you are currently employed. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

#### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological qualitative study is to understand what causes high attrition rates for special education teachers who work with students with severe disabilities and Emotional Behavioral Disorders while simultaneously investigating the reasons some teachers remain in the field.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. The first task is an individual interview that will be held and recorded using Microsoft Teams and will take approximately 30 minutes.
2. The second task is a reflective journal prompt and will take approximately 15 to 20 minutes.
3. The third task is to take part in a focus group interview that will be held and recorded using Microsoft Teams and will take approximately 45 minutes.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include the potential to contribute to a more sustainable and supportive environment for special education teachers working with students with severe disabilities or EBD. By addressing the challenges, they face and providing interventions and strategies to mitigate attrition rates, the study can positively impact the quality of education, teacher well-being, and the overall outcomes for students in special education settings.

### **What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

### **How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with people outside of the group.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies and/or shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer/in a locked file cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then deleted. The researcher and members of her doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

### **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision on whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any questions or withdraw at any time.

### What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

### Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Cara Lord. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Barbara White, at [REDACTED].

### Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

### Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Subject Name

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Signature & Date

## Appendix C

### Permission Letter to Social Media Group Administrator

Dear [REDACTED]

I hope this letter finds you well. I am a graduate student at Liberty University and am conducting research as part of the requirements for a philosophical doctorate degree in Special Education. I am writing to seek permission to post and recruit participants for a research study that I am conducting as part of my dissertation research. The purpose of this study is to explore the causes of the high attrition rate among special education teachers who work with students with severe disabilities or Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD) in separate settings outside of the general education population.

As an aspiring researcher, I am interested in gaining insights into the lived experiences of special education teachers and understanding the factors that contribute to their decision to leave or remain in their positions. I believe that the members of the [REDACTED] could provide valuable perspectives and contribute significantly to the findings of my study.

Participation in the study is voluntary, and all responses will be kept confidential and anonymized. The collected data will only be used for research purposes and will be reported in a manner that ensures the privacy and confidentiality of the participants.

If you grant me permission, I kindly request to post a recruitment message in [REDACTED] [REDACTED] inviting members who are special education teachers working with students with severe disabilities or EBD in separate settings to participate in the study. The recruitment message will include information about the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, and how participants can contact me for further details.

I assure you that I will adhere to all ethical guidelines and regulations pertaining to research involving human participants. If you require any additional information or have any concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at [cjlord@liberty.edu](mailto:cjlord@liberty.edu).

I genuinely appreciate your consideration and support for my research. Your cooperation will be instrumental in gathering valuable insights that can contribute to the understanding of this critical issue and potentially help improve the support and retention of special education teachers.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Cara Lord

## Appendix D

### Permission Letter from Facebook Group

Facebook  
You're not friends on Facebook  
Lives in [REDACTED]

Wed 2:29 PM

You sent

Dear [REDACTED] I hope this letter finds you well. I am a graduate student at Liberty University and am conducting research as part of the requirements for a philosophical doctorate degree in Special Education. I am writing to seek permission to post and recruit participants for a research study that I am conducting as part of my dissertation research. The purpose of this study is to explore the causes of the high attrition rate among special education teachers who work with students with severe disabilities or Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD) in separate settings outside of the general education population. As an aspiring researcher, I am interested in gaining insights into the lived experiences of special education teachers and understanding the factors that contribute to their decision to leave or remain in their positions. I believe that the members of the [REDACTED] could provide valuable perspectives and contribute significantly to the findings of my study. Participation in the study is voluntary, and all responses will be kept confidential and anonymized. The collected data will only be used for research purposes and will be reported in a manner that ensures the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. If you grant me permission, I kindly request to post a recruitment message in [REDACTED] inviting members who are special education teachers working with students with severe disabilities or EBD in separate settings to participate in the study. The recruitment message will include information about the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, and how participants can contact me for further details. I assure you that I will adhere to all ethical guidelines and regulations pertaining to research involving human participants. If you require any additional information or have any concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at cjlord@liberty.edu. I genuinely appreciate your consideration and support for my research. Your cooperation will be instrumental in gathering valuable insights that can contribute to the understanding of this critical issue and potentially help improve the support and retention of special education teachers. Thank you for your time and consideration. Sincerely, Cara Lord

Enter

[REDACTED]

We do receive these requests occasionally. We allow one or two recruitment posts for different projects. Just as long as the posts aren't daily or often.

Enter

You can now message and call each other and see info like Active Status and when you've read messages.

You sent

Just to clarify, are you granting me permission to post? Enter

[REDACTED]

Yes.

Enter

You sent

Thank you!



## Appendix E

### Journal Prompt

# Journal Prompt

Take a moment to reflect on your experiences as a special education teacher working with students who have severe disabilities or emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) in separate settings outside of the general education population. In your journal, describe a specific incident, situation, or recurring theme that stands out to you and has influenced your decision to either stay in or leave your position. Consider the following points:

1. **Physiological Needs:** Reflect on the challenges, stressors, or sources of burnout you have encountered while working with these students in separate settings. How have these challenges affected your physical well-being, such as your health, energy levels, or sleep patterns?
2. **Safety Needs:** Explore how these challenges have impacted your sense of safety and security within your professional role. Have you experienced any concerns related to the physical or emotional safety of yourself or your students? How has this affected your overall job satisfaction and commitment to the profession?
3. **Social Needs:** Reflect on the interpersonal dynamics and relationships you have formed while teaching students with severe disabilities or EBD in separate settings. Consider the support you have received from colleagues, administrators, or other stakeholders. How have these relationships influenced your decision to remain in or leave your current position?
4. **Esteem Needs:** Explore the factors that have contributed to your sense of accomplishment, recognition, and self-worth as a special education teacher in this context. How have these factors influenced your overall job satisfaction and commitment to the profession?
5. **Self-Actualization Needs:** Reflect on how teaching students with severe disabilities or EBD in separate settings has allowed you to fulfill your potential, exercise creativity, and contribute to the well-being of others. To what extent do you feel a sense of purpose and fulfillment in your role?

Based on your experiences, what interventions, strategies, or types of support do you believe could effectively address the high attrition rates among special education teachers working with students with severe disabilities or EBD?

Please feel free to provide any additional insights or thoughts that you consider relevant to understanding the causes of attrition and migration in this context. Your responses will be invaluable for advancing my understanding of this critical issue and informing potential solutions.